

Female Greek Virtue in the House of Atreus:  
Daughters of Agamemnon as depicted in  
Handel's *Oreste*, Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride*, and Strauss's *Elektra*  
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## ABSTRACT

This doctoral project involves a multi-disciplined analysis concerning Agamemnon's daughters (Iphigenia, Electra, and Chrysothemis) and how these women's gender and virtues were depicted as compared with ideal Greek women in antiquity. Three composers in three different eras adapted the literary and musical depictions of these women based on the composer's society, culture, audience expectations, musical climate and personal goals. George Friedrich Handel's *Oreste* (1734), Christoph Willibald von Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1779) and Richard Strauss's *Elektra* (1909) are the main operas used for this analysis.

The Mycenaean House of Atreus, a dynasty which the ancient Greeks traced back to the time of the Trojan War in the 12th century BCE, figures prominently in Greek mythology and ancient Greek literature concerning the Trojan War. The House of Atreus included Agamemnon, King of Mycenae and commander of the Greeks at Troy, his wife Clytaemnestra, their son Orestes, and their daughters: Iphigenia, Electra, and Chrysothemis. For over three thousand years, the legend of this ancient family has inspired musical scores, plays, poetry, architecture, sculpture, paintings, and movies. Numerous studies examine the varying interpretations of the House of Atreus myths; few, if any, address the ways in which female Greek virtues are depicted operatically within the myths.

In the music of Handel's *Oreste*, Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* and Strauss's *Elektra*, Agamemnon's daughters contradict the ideal Greek woman while still exhibiting heroic or idealistic virtues. The analysis of the operas in their social contexts will address the audience expectations and composers' dramatic interpretations of the myth. This analysis will include: a brief overview of ancient Greek culture and gender roles; a literary comparison of the original dramas to the librettos; societal audience expectations in their historical contexts; musical, philosophical, and literary influences on the composers; and an examination of music composed in two different centuries and in three different styles. The brief historical, cultural, literary, and musical analyses highlights the absence and presence of ancient Greek virtues, and how these women can be presented both as heroic, or virtuous, and unvirtuous in the same production.

## DEDICATION

Any meaningful endeavor is never accomplished alone. I would like to thank my family and my friends who were supportive at all times, helped me through the tough times, and cheered me on to the “finish line.” I want to thank my parents, Robert and Patricia Marshall, who encouraged me every step of the way and who have been untiring in their belief in my abilities.

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## Chapter 1

### MYTH AS AN ACCOUNT OF GENDER AND VIRTUE

All societies have norms and cultural expectations pertaining to gender roles and human behavior. These norms and expectations are dependent upon the particular society's own conditions of living, the society's relations with neighboring cultures, and the internal requirements for handling "good" and "bad" human behaviors, in addition to numerous other factors. These factors determine what is "good" or virtuous, and what is "bad" and unvirtuous in a given society. Myths and legends of a culture, often handed down through oral tradition, frequently delineate these roles and expectations. Myth shows the strengths and weaknesses of individuals within a culture as compared to the social norms. Myth provides guidelines of appropriate behavior through the examination of cultural imperfection and undesired human behaviors, and inspires people to remain within the social mores of the culture and provides an emotional catharsis for the audience.

In antiquity, myth was a mainstay for education on gender roles and social norms. Throughout the centuries, updated interpretations of myth, as reflected in popular opera, directly reflected ancient Greek societal values and archetypal roles, and provided philosophical insights of their respective eras. Through an analysis of gender roles and virtues as depicted in opera, these myths can yield an historical perspective on the culture for which the myths were composed. Delineation of gender and

virtue in myth is not limited to antiquity, but can be attributed to myth-based librettos and operas from the 1700s through modern times. Myths borrowed from antiquity have been adopted and altered to fit into the then “current” societal expectations.

Classical Greek myths have been a preferred topic for librettists and opera composers and have served as a source of musical and artistic expression for centuries. Classical myth is defined as “a story that, through its classical form, has attained a kind of immortality because its inherent archetypal beauty, profundity, and power have inspired rewarding renewal and transformation by successive generations.”<sup>1</sup> The appeal of retelling classical Greek myths is certainly tied to the popular familiarity of these timeless stories (requiring little to no backstory for the audience’s understanding of the plot); an extravagant backdrop for costumes, set pieces, and spectacle; and some of the most heart-wrenching dramatic stories to pique the audience’s interest. These aspects lend to the creation of myth-based librettos with undying appeal. The popular myths of the House of Atreus, in particular, attracted the attention of playwrights, librettists and opera composers.

The Mycenaean House of Atreus, a dynasty which the ancient Greeks traced back to the time of the Trojan War in the twelfth century BCE, figures prominently in Greek mythology and ancient Greek literature

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<sup>1</sup> Mark P. O. Morford and Robert J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, Seventh Ed (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 25.

concerning the Trojan War.<sup>2</sup> The House of Atreus included Agamemnon, King of Mycenae and commander of the Greeks at Troy, his wife Clytaemnestra, their son Orestes, and their daughters: Iphigenia, Electra, and Chrysothemis. For over three thousand years, the legend of this ancient family has inspired musical scores, plays, poetry, architecture, sculpture, paintings, and movies. The stories not only depicted the cultures of antiquity, but also illustrated gender roles and ancient virtues.

In the theatre, interpretations of female virtue needed to adhere to audience expectations concerning societal gender roles. In general, unspoken audience expectations were used to delineate female virtue and morality. In theatrical renditions of the Atreus myths, the virtue of Agamemnon's daughters was tested not only under ancient Greek models but also under contemporary societal norms of the time period when the rendition of the myth was created. Numerous studies examine the varying interpretations of the myths about Agamemnon's daughters; few, if any, address the ways female Greek virtues are depicted operatically within the confines of the myth. Nor do previous studies discuss ways in which the myth was altered to marry the philosophical and religious opinions of the society for which the operas were written.

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<sup>2</sup> Although some academics ascribe to evidence that the Trojan War occurred in the twelfth century BCE, not all academics agree this evidence is conclusive. Further, there is no tangible evidence the Trojan War myth existed in the twelfth century BCE and there is no secure evidence of Agamemnon or other members of the House of Atreus existing during this time period. Therefore, one cannot reasonably assign the twelfth century BCE as a conclusive date for these events or characters. In the context of the paper, the date merely provides a frame of reference in which one *may* attribute the events and characters for dramatic and literary purposes.

In the music of George Frideric Handel's *Oreste* (1734), Christoph Willibald von Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1779) and Richard Strauss's *Elektra* (1909), Agamemnon's daughters contradict the ideal Greek woman while still exhibiting heroic or idealistic character traits, such as courage, bravery and determination. A brief overview of ancient Greek societal expectations will contextualize Greek virtues and gender roles and place them within the confines of the dramatic necessities required in opera and in the society contemporary with the writing of these operas. An examination of music composed in three different eras and in three different styles, typifies the juxtaposition of the virtuous and unvirtuous, while simultaneously showing the similarities of the innate virtues exhibited in each opera. The exploration of various musical aspects, coupled with literary, historical, and cultural analyses, show how each opera highlights the absence and presence of these virtues, and how these women can be presented both as heroic (exhibiting characteristics suitable for a hero) or virtuous (having moral integrity and righteousness) and unvirtuous in the same production. In addition, a comparison between the original sources to the operatic libretto and an examination of the influences on the composer will show how myth was altered for audience expectations. This comparison and examination will also show how the alterations were made in order to adhere to the accepted religious, political, and philosophical practices of the period in which they were written, as well as to heighten the dramatic impact of the opera.

## **Fifth-Century BCE Greek Culture**

Much of modern western society has its roots in the fundamentals of the fifth-century BCE's culture and writings; therefore, the fifth century BCE is a practical epoch for study. Fifth-century BCE social documents and literature were written during the height, or Golden Era, of Greek philosophy, politics, art, architecture and literature. Although the fifth century BCE was known for its cultural and political developments, it was plagued with hegemony, an implied imperial dominance of one city-state over another through occupation and intervention. This hegemony was the cause of frequent warring between the Greek city-states. The fifth century BCE began with conflict between the Persians and the Greek city-states in the Greco-Persian Wars (499-449 BCE) and ended with internal strife and fighting between the city-states in the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BCE).

Although cultural developments exploring the nature of man and his place in the world were at the forefront of fifth-century philosophy and literature, the topics of war and military occupation were also common in philosophy and literature. Military preparedness, defense, and physical strength were heroic virtues due to the political and social climate of the time. Marriage became a more important topic - especially for political positioning and strengthening the leadership of the city-state.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, it too became a common topic of literature and myth.

Literature and histories taught in schools naturally perpetuated these

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<sup>3</sup> Sarah B. Pomeroy. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 17-22.

ideas, such that it is no surprise Homer's eighth-century BCE stories, *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey*, which covered the saga of the Trojan War of the twelfth century BCE, were academic staples and still taught in fifth-century BCE schools.<sup>4</sup>

Since these stories were a cornerstone to Greek education and philosophy, despite protests of people like Plato, gender roles and ideal Greek virtues in literature remained relatively unchanging from the twelfth century BCE through the fourth century BCE. One of the ways gender and virtue are depicted in fifth-century BCE social documents and dramatic literature is through the use of contrast. Two distinct character models were presented in stories: the "good" model, and the "bad" model. A clear demarcation between the two was easily illustrated through the presence - or absence - of virtues. Although this method was not absolute for all myth, it was widely used. For instance, the three prominent women in the Trojan War myth, Helen, Clytaemnestra, and Penelope were depicted in contrast to one another and their virtues were compared. Throughout Greek culture, Penelope was revered as the role model for female Greek virtue. Penelope was beautiful, loyal and patient. Both Clytaemnestra and Helen are depicted as lacking virtue in one or more aspects, since they betrayed their husbands, their families, and in turn their kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Sarah B. Pomeroy, Stanley M. Burnstein, et. al. *Ancient Greece: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*, Second Ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 70-80.

<sup>5</sup> Pomeroy, "Goddesses," 21.

One clear difficulty associated with the fifth-century depiction of the "ideal" Greek woman and her virtues is that documentation is either social or literary. Neither historical social documents nor fictitious literature provide a true historical picture about a woman's place *in society*. Social documents, such as the writings of Xenophon, depict what society expected women to do. Alternately, literature, such as the works of Homer and Sophocles, shows what a woman did within a constructed storyline, but it does not depict real life.<sup>6</sup> The depiction of a woman's socially correct behavior is virtually the same in both types of sources; however, neither sheds light on a woman's actual actions within a society. As Michael Shaw put it, "The social documents do not show us actual women; the drama does not show us an actual society."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, analysis relies on consistencies between both source types.

According to Plato, "human well-being [was] the highest aim of moral conduct and thought, the virtues [were] the requisite skills and character traits" for Greeks in their society.<sup>8</sup> For the focus of this study, "virtue" in the ancient world, or the Greek "*areté*" meaning "excellence" or "manliness" in Homer's stories, is an established disposition to act in a certain way under challenging conditions. In ancient Rome, virtue was

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<sup>6</sup> Elaine Fantham, Helene Peet Foley, et. al., "Women in Classical Athens: Heroines and Housewives." In *Women in the Classical World: Image and Text* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 72.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Shaw, "The Female Intruder: Women in Fifth-Century Drama," *Classical Philology* 70, (1975): 255, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/stable/284411>.

<sup>8</sup> Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Plato's Ethics: An Overview. Accessed 20 July 2012. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-ethics/>.



known by the word “*virtus*” which meant literally, “manliness.” In antiquity, and therefore in this analysis, courage, self-control, and justice were the principal traits of virtue.

Plato’s writings about Socrates’s philosophies have helped modern scholars understand the moral viewpoint of the ancient Greeks.<sup>9</sup> Plato’s ideas concerning virtue and moral standards were harsh in that he philosophized “the soul [was] to remain aloof from the pleasures of the body; communal life demands the subordination of individual wishes and aims.”<sup>10</sup> This austere view is consistent with life in the Greek city-state where the common good of the city-state outweighed the good of the few. All things must work harmoniously to benefit the Greek city-state rather than the individual.

### **Societal Roles and Expectations**

Ancient Greek expectations for male and female roles were unyielding since they were seen as vital to the advancement of the Greek city-state and society as a whole. It is important to note, “valuations of good and bad in respect to women and the behavior expected of them are determined by the male ethic.”<sup>11</sup> Although there are virtually no known writings by women about women from this era, it is important to note that women in antiquity were highly regarded in their communities. Misogyny, which occurs much later in literature, is not apparent in the original

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<sup>9</sup> Plato was Socrates student. Socrates did not write anything, rather it was his student who wrote about his philosophies. Plato claimed to write what Socrates said, but it is not always clear where the real Socrates ends and the character Socrates begins.

<sup>10</sup> Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Plato’s Ethics.

<sup>11</sup> Pomeroy, “Ancient Greece,” 74.

Homeric myths. Even so, later authors and composers melded and shaped women's roles and virtues to fit the audience's "current" perception of what the ideal woman was for their society. In this way, the myth became more relatable to the audience and their "current" worldview.

The spheres of existence for men and women were sharply divided, the female's existence lying within the *thalamos*, the physical home, and the *oikos*, or the family unit, with the male's existence lying mostly outside of it.<sup>12</sup> A woman's value was based around her beauty and accomplishments. Her life was centered around marriage, family, children, and industry in the home. The fulfillment of her duty to the *oikos* was a direct reflection of her morality.

A woman's virtuous traits were love, obedience, seclusion, duty to the home, empathy, ability to create harmony and cooperation, and submission. Submission became one of the most important traits, because if she assumed a dominant role she ruined the man's honor, the *oikos*, and in turn, society.<sup>13</sup> Women were considered to be emotional creatures while men were unemotional. Relationships between men and women were reserved for the household. Marriage was the only contract a woman would enter into her entire life. Women were expected "to act modestly in public and in the company of men, and above all to be chaste."<sup>14</sup> In contrast, men were permitted to have concubines. In fact, concubines

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Seaford, "The Imprisonment of Women in Greek Tragedy," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 110, (1990): 79, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/stable/639065>.

<sup>13</sup> Fantham, "Women in Classical Athens," 33.

<sup>14</sup> Pomeroy, "Ancient Greece," 75.

obtained through conquest and war were valuable prizes, or *thymé* (an honor or prize that has tangible value), not just because of their intrinsic value of slave work, but because capturing an enemy's daughter or wife was considered the ultimate insult in antiquity.<sup>15</sup>

A woman's life was secluded and she seldom ventured out of the household. The morally ideal life was one of seclusion. If a woman was found spending time outside the household alone (without her husband), it usually meant that there was something aberrant in the family driving her into the *polis* (the city-state in ancient Greece, characteristic of Greek political organization from 800 to 400 BCE).<sup>16</sup> This morally superior life of seclusion greatly influenced women and was the governing force in determining appropriate relationships. A woman's friends were limited to women inside the family. Those friendships were permanent fixtures of a woman's identity and could only be broken by death. Conversely, as Shaw pointed out, "every person who was not a relative was a potential enemy."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, friendships between women who are outside of the family are seldom seen in Greek myth.

Iphigenia in *Iphigénie en Tauride* is an example of seclusion in the Temple of Artemis (Diana). After her abduction and rescue by Artemis, Iphigenia associated only with the other priestesses who, though they were not blood relations, became her "family." In *Elektra*, the idea of seclusion is again portrayed. Electra was isolated because her only "friends"- that is,

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<sup>15</sup> Pomeroy, "Ancient Greece," 73-75.

<sup>16</sup> Shaw, "The Female Intruder," 256.

<sup>17</sup> Shaw, "The Female Intruder," 257.

her entire family, minus Orestes - turned against her and betrayed her. Both Iphigenia and Electra existed in isolation and yearned for the one family member who could still provide friendship, consolation, and even a sort of salvation; their brother, Orestes.

Men had an altogether different set of expectations. The codes of conduct for men centered around being a competent warrior and protector. A man's virtuous traits were honor, strategic advice, intelligence and cleverness, domination over enemies, self-mastery, and worldly associations with other men to gain protection and advancement.<sup>18</sup> According to Sarah B. Pomeroy, "a 'good' man, should honor the gods, keep promises and oaths, and be loyal to friends and fellow warriors."<sup>19</sup> His sphere of existence was in the *polis*, or public arena, and his duty was to protect the *oikos*.<sup>20</sup> According to Shaw, a man's "success is measured by the honor the community gives him, honor is the highest goal."<sup>21</sup>

As a heroic figure and victorious warrior, King Agamemnon was one of the most revered men in Greek antiquity. He was frequently the standard used to measure a man's worth. Although he was revered, Agamemnon also committed one of the worst crimes against his family, sacrificing his daughter, Iphigenia, to appease Artemis in order to gain

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<sup>18</sup> Patricia D. Ahearne-Kroll, "The Portrayal of Aseneth in *Joseph and Aseneth*: Women's Religious Experience in Antiquity and the Limitations of Ancient Narratives," from *Women in Gender in Ancient Religions: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, edited by Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll, Paul A. Holloway, and James A. Kelhoffer, (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck 2010), 43.

<sup>19</sup> Pomeroy, "Ancient Greece," 73.

<sup>20</sup> Shaw, "The Female Intruder," 256-258.

<sup>21</sup> Shaw, "The Female Intruder," 257.

favorable winds for the Greek fleet to sail to Troy at the beginning of the Trojan expedition. This subject matter provided an interesting and dramatic topic for playwrights. Agamemnon is a prime example of a character in ancient Greek myth portrayed as virtuous, yet unvirtuous at the same time.

Crimes committed by one family member against another were considered the worst types of crimes. The myth of Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia showed one of the most virtuous and honorable men committing one of the worst crimes. This topic proved the perfect subject for philosophical and religious discussion. At the end of the Euripidean version of the myth, it was revealed that Agamemnon's "virtue" was unsullied because Artemis replaced Iphigenia with a deer and he did not actually sacrifice her. At the end of the drama, Agamemnon's male virtue remains intact.

### **Ramifications**

The punishment for crimes against the family in antiquity was believed to be enforced by mythical gods and goddesses, like the Erinyes. In ancient Greek and Roman mythology, the Erinyes, or the Furies, were goddesses of vengeance and their sole purpose was to pursue and punish crimes against the family. These tormentors were some of the most beloved creatures in opera. Beloved, because they provided fantastical costumes, opportunities for dance and special music. In Handel's musical drama *Hercules* (1745), he composed the furious beating of wings with

rapid sixteenth note-flutterings and chromatic passages as if these harbingers of wrath were literally swooping down upon Dejanira.

Another consideration when discussing virtues in antiquity concerns extra-marital affairs. Although men were permitted liaisons with their own slaves, adulterous women brought tremendous dishonor and disgrace upon themselves and their families. Therefore, Electra and Orestes had difficulty accepting their mother's affair with Agamemnon's cousin, Aegisthus, which was the ultimate insult to Agamemnon and the family as a whole. In a contemporary world where a person can readily view adultery in the latest soap opera on television, the act of adultery lacks the shock value it had in antiquity. When put into a Greek's perspective, and when committed against the society's most venerated hero, it was horrific.

Adherence to the moral code was of extreme importance in Greek society. Dramatists, poets and philosophers often used myths as a vehicle to reinforce ideal virtue for both genders. Yet, each gender had specific and exclusive virtues. For one gender to display virtues from the other gender, unless it was loyalty, was considered a flaw in their character and undesirable. For instance, a man who lacked emotional self-control was considered weak. Likewise, for a woman to exhibit male virtues in any way rendered her unvirtuous. This "bad" behavior on the woman's part was seen as a weakening of male-female roles within the *oikos* and *polis*. This

weakening destroyed the fabric of the *city-state* and ultimately ancient Greek society as a whole. As a result, the woman, in her entirety, was seen as unvirtuous.

Although the separation between classical virtues assigned to gender roles was severe, Greeks believed it was important for members of society to not only embrace the different gender roles, responsibilities, and virtues, but also that these distinctions maintained the balance between the needs of the *polis* and the needs of the *oikos*, resulting in a stronger society as a whole. Shaw claimed that according to the dictates of the Greek city-state, “the society which ignores the female is sterile and lacks emotional foundations [and] one that ignores the male is plunged into interfamilial feuding.”<sup>22</sup> This is perhaps a reason why Greek philosophers and dramatists chose to discuss, portray, and examine the triumphs and failings of both genders in their writings. The founding philosophies of antiquity and modern culture were based on this self-discovery, analysis and observation.

Plato said Socrates thought, “the shortest and surest way to live with honor in the world is to be in reality what we would appear to be; and if we observe, we shall find that all human virtues increase and strengthen themselves by the practice and experience of them.”<sup>23</sup> He also imparted that to achieve honor and virtue, one must experience it. Myth in theatre was one of the ways in which Greek society was able to vicariously

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<sup>22</sup> Shaw, “The Female Intruder,” 257.

<sup>23</sup> Refspace - Socrates. Accessed 12 July 2012. <http://refspace.com/quotes/Socrates/2>.

experience virtue: its triumphs as well as its failings. By experiencing the battle between “right” and “wrong” in the Atreus myths and the struggle between revenge and moral integrity, Greeks took an important step on the journey to becoming virtuous and heroic in the Greek ideal. Opera composers throughout history have repeatedly revisited these myths for this same self-observation and understanding, while still meeting the goal of providing an evening's entertainment.



## Chapter 2

### FROM AMPHITHEATRE TO OPERA HOUSE

Although the cultural differences between fifth century BCE Athens and the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Western Europe are vast, the gap between the ancient theatre and the opera house is much narrower. A brief overview of ancient Greek drama and the use of myth in the opera house will highlight their similarities. A better understanding of female Greek virtue and gender roles can be established through an examination of how Greek myth was used in the theatre and in opera.

#### **Ancient Greek Drama**

Ancient Greek Theatre emerged out of a dithyramb, or improvised story, sung by a leader and a refrain sung by a chorus. The story unfolded through the music and dance accompanying it. Eventually, the improvisation turned into written scripts and led to the form of lyric prose recited or sung by one actor. Later, as other actors were added, dialogue became more common until the form of what we know as Greek tragedy evolved. By the fifth century BCE in Athens, tragedies had become affiliated with the worship of Dionysis and were state-sponsored events performed in his honor.<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that tragedies were Athenian constructions and were not Greek in general. Further, the performances usually took place in the sacred precinct of the gods, using

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<sup>24</sup> Oscar G. Brockett, *History of the Theatre*, Sixth Ed (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1991), 13-16.

amphitheatre-style seating. The audience sat up on a terraced hillside called the *theatron* and the *orchestra*, or dancing place, is where the actors and dancers performed.

The performance began with a prologue, which was the backstory for the ensuing drama, and was followed by the chorus who established the mood of the scene. Following this, several scenes developed the main action. Choruses separated each scene by commenting on the action or the mood of a character. At the end of this series was the *exodus*, where all actors and chorus exited the stage. The action was continuous and took place in one setting, with the climax of the plot typically near the end of the drama. All deaths and violence - with rare exception - took place off-stage. Further, Greek dramatists were economical when involving characters and events in the plays, preferring simplicity to complexity. The parallels between this form of drama and that of opera, especially *opera seria*, are remarkable. Greek drama would lend itself to *opera seria* conventions well, so the Greek form of drama was a logical starting place for librettists.

Of the hundreds of plays written between 500 and 400 BCE, only thirty-one tragedies remain and are mainly comprised of the work of three playwrights: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.<sup>25</sup> Aeschylus was the first playwright to introduce the second actor in addition to the original hymn leader of the *dithyramb*, or fervent speech. Aeschylus, a well-

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<sup>25</sup> Brockett, "History of the Theatre," 17-18.

received, accomplished playwright in his time, won numerous competitions and was considered a religious and philosophical playwright, having focused his plays on supernatural conflicts. His plays were normally written in trilogies which were the format of all tragedies. Aeschylus was known for his happy resolutions to conflict, as well as for his use of theatrics to enhance his plays: larger choruses, scenic design, and spectacles.

In contrast, Sophocles reduced the role of the chorus and added no spectacles or theatrical effects. Rather, Sophocles focused on individual complex characters, depicted with exceptional clarity of emotion, who were all psychologically motivated. His characters were more “three-dimensional.” Sophocles, being more of a “realist” than Aeschylus, introduced a third actor into his plays, which enabled more realistic dialogue between actors. According to Oscar G. Brockett, Sophocles was “the most skillful of the Greek dramatists in mastery of dramatic structure...[the] exposition is carefully motivated; scenes are built through suspense to climax; the action is clear and logical throughout.”<sup>26</sup> While Aeschylus’s plays are centered on the choral spectacle or “show;” in Sophocles’s plays, the sheer force of the dramatic action takes the lead.

Both Aeschylus and Sophocles were immensely popular in their time; Euripides was not as fortunate and became popular only in later periods after his death. Euripides’s subject matter disturbed his

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<sup>26</sup> Brockett, “History of the Theatre,” 19.

contemporaries because he challenged moral values and depicted unvirtuous women. Medea, who murdered her sons; and Phaedra, who was in love with her stepson, are just two examples of his plays' subjects. Not only did Euripides's subject matter offend, but he often fostered these questionable themes through "realistic exploration of psychological motivations" which were thought to be "too undignified for tragedy."<sup>27</sup>

In addition, Euripides's characters often questioned the Greek gods' sense of justice. Through his plays, Euripides suggested that human beings care more about morality and virtue than the gods do. This type of thinking was radical and bordered on the sacrilegious in antiquity. Euripides either used minor, lesser-known myths, or used well-known myths and drastically altered them. Consequently, the audience did not always easily grasp the plotline. Also, the dramatic action was more obscure based on Euripides's lack of causality in the flow of one scene to the next. According to Brockett, "Euripides was thought of as dangerous because of his ideas and artistically inferior because of his dramatic techniques."<sup>28</sup> Although, Euripides was criticized for his plots and dramatic techniques, he was praised for his realistic characters and excellent dialogue. His work was melodramatic and sentimental. It is perhaps because of these accolades, his themes of morality, and the shocking subject matter that so many opera composers chose to utilize his plays in their works. It is also not surprising composers would choose

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<sup>27</sup> Brockett, "History of the Theatre," 19.

<sup>28</sup> Brockett, "History of the Theatre," 19.

Euripides or Sophocles over Aeschylus, whose fully developed trilogies, packed with large elaborate chorus and dance segments, would have been excessively long operas and would most likely have fallen into the category of French Grand Opera, with its fiscally prohibitive production costs.

Although each ancient Greek playwright chose different stories and different ways of depicting them, each served the same purpose in society: to instruct and to entertain the citizens of the Greek city-state. As Richard Seaford points out, “Tragedy was the product of the developing city-state.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, it was logical that gender roles and virtues, which supported the developing society, were popular topics for dramas.

In ancient Greek dramas, virtue was often rendered through gender-centered associations, especially in the context of ancient Greek society. In Greek drama and later in opera, a pattern emerged which showed a character of pure gender-based virtue at the beginning of the work who progressed to the other gender or mixed gender-based virtue at the end. This pattern began in fifth-century BCE Athenian literature and continued throughout the history of opera. The pattern is as follows:

1. a man exhibited purely male virtues did something that threatened the pure female,
2. the pure female came out of *oikos* and opposed the male,
3. the female took on male virtues,
4. the male displayed previously invisible female virtues (some sort of emotional display of love or pity), and

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<sup>29</sup> Seaford, “The Imprisonment of Women in Greek Tragedy,” 90.

5. finally, there was a new plot development and as a result, the male and/or female no longer displayed pure gender-based virtues, and instead displayed a blending of the two.<sup>30</sup>

For example, in *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Iphigenia exhibits not just female virtues, but she also speaks of her honor, the honor of her father, brother and family, displays intellect and gives strategic advice, which are all male characteristics and virtues. Likewise, Orestes shows many female qualities like love, sorrow, pity and even thinks about withdrawing from the world completely, alluding to the female virtue of seclusion.<sup>31</sup>

One possible interpretation of this design is that no person is pure and virtuous in the Greek ideal. The pattern is important to acknowledge because it has direct ramifications. When females exhibit male-based virtues, it taints and even destroys their Greek female virtue. In both *Elektra* and *Iphigénie en Tauride*, the pattern emerges in particular with Electra and Iphigenia exhibiting male-based virtues and Orestes exhibiting female-based virtues. In *Oreste*, this juxtaposition between the two is not as clear and, other than the emotionalism of Orestes, gender roles and virtues in the eighteenth-century sense are portrayed as the ideal.

The reasons for this pattern are unclear; however, several purposes for the retention of this pattern are possible. By dramatizing the conflict between the *oikos* and *polis*, the composer and librettist show the imperfection of humanity and the need for harmony between them, or

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<sup>30</sup> Shaw, "The Female Intruder," 261-266.

<sup>31</sup> Euripides, *Three plays: Alcestis, Hippolytus, and Iphigenia in Tauris*, translated by Philip Vellacott (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1984).

illustrate the deficiency and limits of a society, or urge people to be humble and pious. Alternately, in showing a character to be "fully human," they show this new type of total person as a benefit to society.<sup>32</sup>

According to Murray, Sophocles himself believed, "moral instruction was a vital and valuable function of tragic drama, in particular...the voice of the poet was the voice of morality and wisdom."<sup>33</sup> Finally, by exploring female virtue, society might find meaning for a man's place in society, as was the case in Strauss's *Elektra*. Whatever the original intent, the pattern emerges time and time again, and through "unvirtuous" female exhibition, audiences are thrilled, captivated, and continue to ponder women's triumph or demise in the male-dominated society of Ancient Greece.

## **Opera**

Music has adopted Greek mythology in almost every genre from the cantata to program music. The use of myth for opera stems from the origins of opera itself. The Renaissance, which spanned from the fourteenth century to the seventeenth century in Europe, was a cultural movement based on studies in classicism. Ancient Greek art and culture influenced Renaissance artists, writers, and philosophers, who rejected religious dogma in favor of the examination of the human condition to

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<sup>32</sup> Robert D. Murray, Jr., "Thought and Structure in Sophoclean Tragedy," in *Sophocles: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 23-24.

<sup>33</sup> Murray, "Thought and Structure in Sophoclean Tragedy," 23.

determine morality. This “new” philosophy and way of thinking was entrenched in reason, ethics, and justice, and was based on classical principles.

The Florentine Camerata (1573-1590) was a group of Italian aristocrats during the Renaissance who believed music had become corrupt through excessive use of polyphony, where the music was placed of higher import than the words. Meeting at Count Giovanni de Bardi’s estate, Giralomo Mei, Giulio Caccini, Pietro Strozzi, Vincenzo Galilei, and Ottavio Rinuccini proposed that music, drama, and prose could be improved, and therefore, society as a whole, if composers and dramatists returned to the ancient Greek style and form of drama. The Florentine Camerata believed the plot and text should be more important than the music. The music should serve the words and reflect the music of the ancient Greeks.<sup>34</sup>

The Florentine Camerata believed all drama should be sung. Therefore, the “new” form of drama was based on the dramas of the ancient Greeks. The philosophy and experimentation of these men forged a new style of musical drama, what we now call “opera.” As Greek dramas and philosophies were the basis for this new genre, it is no wonder the experimentation started with the same subjects and stories as the

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<sup>34</sup> Mark P.O. Morford and Robert J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, Seventh Ed (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 705-706.



“original” Greek dramas. The first operas on record were Jacobi Peri’s *Daphne* (1597) and *Euridice* (1600) with the most successful in this “new” form being Claudio Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo* (1607).

In light of this new genre of theatrical entertainment, Greek myth became a popular theme of courtly life in Europe. Early operas were commissioned for special occasions, and were confined to the court until the first public opera house opened at Teatro San Cassiano in 1637 in Venice, Italy, which spread the genre to the masses. These new operas, based on Greek myth, had happy endings, spectacles, elaborate costumes and set pieces, and were similar to Aeschylus’s model of Greek drama. Greek myth was an excellent tool to wield when producing fantastical showpieces at court. The subject matter and stories were familiar to the audience and required little backstory. Gender roles were the traditional, straightforward ideals of the virtuous female and heroic male. Frequently, the virtuous female and heroic male were likened to the commissioners of the work, or the royal family members, enhancing benefactor flattery by likening them to the gods.

It was not just Greek tragedies that became the model for later theatrical works, but also the model of the Greek comedy. The comedic works of Plautus and Terence served as “the inspiration of dramatists of the Renaissance throughout the whole of Western Europe.”<sup>35</sup> Beginning with Petrarch, considered the father of the Renaissance and Humanism,

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<sup>35</sup> Cornelia C. Coulter, , "The Plautine Tradition in Shakespeare," *The Journal of English and German Philology* 19, no. 1 (Jan. 1920): 66, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/stable/27700986>.

who hand-copied the plays of Terence, the passion for Greek drama and its conventions were passed down through the generations of poets, playwrights and eventually librettists.

Ancient Greek comedy's stock characters, including the clever slave, the lovers (hero and young girl) and Senex (the miserly old man of the house), the Parasite (the other man from outside the household), comedic plots, mistaken identities, the use of asides, disguises, and stories ending with resolution through marriage. These were the cornerstones for later genres and were incorporated into the works of William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe in England, Jean Racine and Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais in France, and in the librettos of Lorenzo da Ponte, as well as others. The Greek stock characters eventually became the stock characters of the *Commedia dell'arte* (Columbina, Pantalone, Zanni, and Il Dottore) and ancient Greek plot conventions were later incorporated into the operas of the eighteenth century. Combining stock characters with the improvisational nature of *Commedia dell'arte*, infused with the philosophies and romanticism of the time when they were written, made these characters accessible and appealing to eighteenth-century audiences; and as a result, they were used by composers from Handel to Mozart.<sup>36</sup> Virtue was clearly sanctioned and gender roles (other than the shrewd female slave) were typical.

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<sup>36</sup> Coulter, "The Plautine Tradition," 67-68.

In the eighteenth-century Baroque Era, *opera seria* was the new formulaic genre, with stylized presentational virtuosic singing and formulaic librettos. Librettists and composers diminished and even removed the Greek Chorus to hone in on showcasing the talents of their superstars. Genuine acting and the adherence to the integrity of the plot were afterthoughts.

In the French court, myth was extremely fashionable. The courtiers of Louis XIV's Court were often dressed as Greek gods and goddesses for evening entertainment and the King himself was likened to the all-powerful Zeus in many of Jean-Baptiste Lully's court entertainments. The formula for *tragédie-lyrique* was similar to that of the original Greeks: recitative and aria with scenes interspersed with chorus and dancing. This similarity made the plots of Greek myths easily adaptable for French courtly entertainments and the opera house.

Although opera was conceived with the Florentine Camerata's model of Greek drama in mind, the conventions of *opera seria* and *tragédie-lyrique* adopted for audience appeal weakened the integrity of the words and drama. Plots became convoluted and the through-line of Sophocles' dramatic action was interrupted with different musical numbers without causality and separated by little or no transitions. The drama would halt entirely for encores of arias sung by the audience's favorite singers. The simple plots with minimal characters became

complex plots infused with love interests and subplots. Due to these conventions, the impact of the myths waned and the original Greek model of drama was no longer intact.

The late eighteenth century brought about operatic reform spearheaded by Christoph Willibald von Gluck. Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762) was the first reform opera of its kind to resurrect the idea of the Greek Chorus. Through Gluck's use of Greek myth as a vehicle for his dramatic and musical reforms, *Orfeo ed Euridice* portrayed the drama objectively rather than a fusion of the Greek myth combined with the latest fashionable theatrical conventions. Like the era before him, Gluck still used myth to flatter the monarchy; however, he focused on the realism of the story and the emotional and psychological drama instead of theatrics and spectacle. He simplified the arias and incorporated a logical plot flow in the opera, which differed from the separation of the recitative-aria convention in *opera seria*. In addition, Gluck made the conventions of opera work for the story rather than distract from it. For instance, instead of the overture serving as mere introduction and an announcement that the opera was about to begin, Gluck used the orchestral overture like a Greek prologue, as a part of the drama, to show the audience the nature of the action about to take place. The overture served as an emotional and dramatic exposition.

In the nineteenth-century Romantic Era, myths were still used in the opera house, but with two extremes in plots: extremely tragic or

extremely comedic. Fantasy and the supernatural were popular subjects in the Romantic Era and above all, love stories with tragic endings. As many Greek myths end tragically, they served as a great place from which poets and librettists could draw to fulfill this need for tragic love stories. Unlike baroque and classical composers, romantic composers did not need to change the plots to have happy endings to please their audiences, so they kept the original Greek dramas intact. They also employed larger orchestras and incorporated more colors, and displayed greater emotion through the dramatic force of the orchestra. The orchestra functioned like a Greek Chorus and commented on the action in Romantic drama. Private patrons were now funding opera, so composers were able to pick more artistic projects without the need to liken their benefactors to gods and take up the latest fashion. Hector Berlioz's *Les Troyens* (1856-1858), based on Virgil's *The Aeneid*, is an excellent example of this type of Romantic opera. Berlioz's opera shows traits of Aeschylus in its grandeur and scale as well as its length, and adheres to the original gender role and Greek virtues for both men and women.

Greek myth was also used in opera for sheer entertainment and comedy. Struggles of Greek virtue were left out, characters were satirized and plots rewritten for fantasy and humor. An example is Jacques Offenbach's *Orphée aux enfers* (1858) which was a satire on Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*. *Orphée aux enfers*, famous for the "Infernal Galop," or French can-can music, set the tone for a comedic rendition of the Orpheus

and Eurydice myth. In this rendition, Jupiter was disguised as a fly, during a farcical love duet between Jupiter and Eurydice. Not only did this use of myth eradicate heroic male and female virtue of the ancient Greeks, it drastically downplayed fidelity and the virtues of the gods and women.

From 1900 on, myth in opera became much more serious. Tragic endings were commonplace and the plots were closer to the original myths than ever before. In the Modern and Post-Modern Eras the interest in psychology and philosophy prompted thinkers like Nietzsche and Freud to once again look back to the writings of the Greeks to examine society and the human condition. The most frequently used myths throughout history are:

1. the damsel rescue myth of Orpheus and Eurydice,
2. the king going to war and the queen's grief, as in the Dido and Aeneas myth,
3. a woman helps a man and is left by him afterwards, as in the Arianna and Theseus myth,
4. the jealous wife becomes homicidal, like in Medea or Hercules and Dejanira, and lastly
5. Trojan War myths which include the characters Agamemnon, Menelaus, Helen, Clytaemnestra, Aegisthus, Penelope, Electra, Orestes, Iphigenia, and Chrysothemis.

It is interesting to note that in each one of these myths, the women in the story exhibit some sort of unvirtuous fault, while the men in the myth remain heroic, virtuous, and noble in the ancient Greek sense. Perhaps this is because society's power brokers were men, and therefore, the librettists, composers, impresarios of these operas catered to the tastes of men and the realities of their contemporary society. There is no evidence

for the direct manipulation of these roles based on the composer's male viewpoint; nonetheless, the emphasized character flaws of women were a persistent theme from one opera to the next.

The portrayal of Greek societal roles and female virtues, and philosophies of the era in which the operas were written, created rigid theatrical expectations from which composers launched conjecture into the nature of humanity, honor, and societal norms. Music was the medium with which the composer painted these virtues and illuminated the dramatic impact, from which discussion and conjecture could be made. Handel's *Oreste*, Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride*, and Strauss's *Elektra* are extremely different aesthetically, written from 45 to 184 years apart from the height of the Baroque Era to the end of the Romantic Era, yet the composers' choices of orchestral instrumentation, libretti, and methods of encapsulating female virtues bear uncanny similarities. The composers' choices in creating these new works hearken back to the Florentine Camerata's original intent of philosophizing the origins, power and meaning of Greek drama.<sup>37</sup>

One of the ways composers were able to emulate antiquity was by beginning and ending their arias (Handel and Gluck) or opera (Strauss) with the same music, in order to evoke the Greek ideal of balance and

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<sup>37</sup> Francesco Algarotti, "From the Saggio sopra l'opera in musica (1755)," in *Source Readings in Music History: From Classical Antiquity through the Romantic Era*, edited by Oliver Strunk (New York: W.W. Norton 1950), 657-658; Michael Ewans, "Iphigénie en Tauride and Elektra: 'Apolline' and 'Dionysiac' Receptions of Greek Tragedy into Opera," from *A Companion to Classical Receptions*, edited by Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell 2008), 231-234.

symmetry. Although one might postulate that the repetition in the instance of Handel and Gluck was merely a convention of the times in which the music was composed, it still mirrors the Greek ideal of symmetry. Although Strauss had much more compositional freedom of form, he chose to use this Greek symmetry in *Elektra*; starting and ending the opera with the Agamemnon motive.



## Chapter 3

### *ORESTE* (1734)

#### **George Frideric Handel and London's *Opera Seria***

In 1710, the Duke of Hanover, King George I of Great Britain, brought George Frideric Handel to London write opera. He became a naturalized English citizen and principal composer for the Queen's Theatre in the Haymarket and eventually, the Covent Garden Theatre. When Handel first moved to England, British politics were in turmoil. In 1689 Parliament triumphed over the crown, and differing political parties, the Tories and the Whigs, were all struggling for political control.<sup>38</sup> During this turbulent time, Handel composed operas for the Royal Academy of Music, which was "the most comprehensive attempt in the eighteenth century to establish high-quality opera in London, and [was] arguably the most ambitious scheme of its kind before the foundation of the Arts Council in the [twentieth] century."<sup>39</sup> King George I and the English nobility sponsored the Academy in 1720 to create a regular Italian opera season in London.<sup>40</sup>

There were three imported staff composers at the Academy: Attilo Ariosti, Giovanni Bononcini, and Handel. In 1721, Handel won a

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<sup>38</sup> Pamphleteering was a common practice in the Eighteenth Century where authors created and distributed pamphlets concerning a political issue to sway public opinion or gain support or votes for a political campaign.

<sup>39</sup> Winton Dean and J. Merrill Knapp, *Handel's Operas, 1704-1726* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) 298.

<sup>40</sup> Winton Dean, *Handel and the Opera Seria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) 30.

composition competition between house composers and earned the title of leading house composer. Even though Handel won the competition, Bononcini became his “chief rival.” Both had quite a following in London, though patrons would frequently attend the opera merely to compare one composer to the other. They even garnered political support, with the Whig party preferring Bononcini, while the Tories favored Handel. Consequently, their librettos, music, and topic choices were up to public scrutiny and debate.<sup>41</sup>

As the Academy’s leading house composer, Handel earned the salary of £800 a year, “enough to live comfortably but far less than the star singers earned.”<sup>42</sup> In contrast, the leading man, or *primo uomo*, of the Academy earned £3.000.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, the *prima donna*, or leading woman, earned £2.000, which in 2004 would have equaled to approximately \$400,000.<sup>44</sup> The focus of London opera was on the singers and not necessarily the composers. In addition to the three imported composers, Handel from Germany and the other two from Italy, the Academy

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas Forrest Kelly, *First Nights at the Opera* (New Haven: Yale University Press, c2004) 8 and 16; William Weber, "Handel's London - social, political, and intellectual contexts," In *The Cambridge Companion to Handel*, Edited by Donald Burrows (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 47. The Whigs took total control of parliament until 1760 when the Tories took it back. Tories ethics were entrenched in the motto “God, King, and Country” and generally advocated monarchism, while Tories were against absolute rule and favored wealthy, aristocratic families.

<sup>42</sup> Kelly, *First Nights*, 11.

<sup>43</sup> Kelly, *First Nights*, 39.

<sup>44</sup> Isabelle Emerson. *Five Centuries of Women Singers* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2005), 65.

imported some of the best singers and instrumentalists from Italy and Germany for their productions, including the castrati.<sup>45</sup>

Castrati were extremely popular in Italy at the time because “no natural man’s voice could have encompassed the fantastic bravura passages that were then so much admired and considered indispensable for the principal characters in an opera.”<sup>46</sup> Castrati were usually cast in heroic male lead roles because the higher voices were thought to be more virtuous and heroic, more pure, than the lower voices, such as in Theseus and Orestes.<sup>47</sup> Handel tailored his heroic roles to highlight the brilliance and agility of the castrato’s voice. He individually tailored the scores to fit the unique needs of the individual voice and made the *primo uomo*’s music his first priority. Due to Handel’s preference for casting castrati for his operas, London became the second center of activity (Venice being the first) for all the great castrati in Europe and the Royal Academy of Music became the heart of *opera seria* in England.

The *primo uomo* castrato for the Royal Academy was Francesco Bernardi, also known as Senesino. Senesino, an Italian, became a castrato at age 13. After years of intensive training in bel canto singing, composition, harmony, and counterpoint (which castrati used to write

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<sup>45</sup> Angus Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974), 92; Kelly, *First Nights*, 8. A castrato is a male singer with a high voice as a result from castration before puberty. Castrati were usually cast in heroic leads because it was thought that the higher the voice, the more virtuous and heroic the character was.

<sup>46</sup> Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 31-32.

<sup>47</sup> Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 31-32. Tenors were normally cast in roles as old men if used at all. Tenors and bass voices were considered to be coarse and unappealing.

ornaments), Senesino performed in Venice and in Dresden.<sup>48</sup> He remained there until Handel hired him for the 1720 opera season in England. Senesino sang 17 lead roles at the Royal Academy; he was hailed as having “a powerful, clear, equal and sweet contralto voice, with a perfect intonation and an excellent shake.”<sup>49</sup>

All the Royal Academy productions were performed in the King’s Theatre. The average full house box office of an evening of opera was approximately £150, hardly enough revenue to keep the doors open considering the cost of the singers’ salaries alone. Donations from the nobility and house rentals for masques earned the extra needed revenue for the Academy to keep business running smoothly. The orchestra pit was situated on the ground floor. As was customary for the time in London, patrons frequently sat on stage among the scenery to watch the opera. Opera patrons were frequently engaged in eating meals, chatting with friends, and playing cards during the opera, but would leave these diversions to listen to their favorite singer or their favorite aria.<sup>50</sup>

Prior to 1714, the King’s Theatre was known as the Queen’s Theatre and was a playhouse. The King’s Theater made the transition to an opera house quite readily as the house was extremely resonant, making it difficult for actors trying to speak clearly and distinctly; however this effervescent atmosphere was well suited to a castrato’s voice and to an

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<sup>48</sup> Naomi Andre, *Voicing Gender: Castrati, Travesti, and the Second Woman in Early Nineteenth Century Italian Opera* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 36-37.

<sup>49</sup> Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 94.

<sup>50</sup> Kelly, *First Nights*, 46.

orchestra. This made it the perfect environment for Handel's music.<sup>51</sup> The Covent Garden Theatre was also acoustically beneficial, as it also was originally a playhouse. It began its conversion to an opera house in 1734 when the Marie Sallé dance company performed its first ballet and Handel began his first season in the new opera house.<sup>52</sup>

*Opera seria* was based in numerous prescribed conventions, and eighteenth-century audiences had rigid expectations regarding what an evening of *opera seria* entailed. Some of these conventions were:

1. there was distinct separation between *opera seria*, or serious opera, and *opera buffa*, or comic opera,
2. there was a dominance of the singer and use of vocal ornamentation and a hierarchy among singers,
3. there was simple acting and use of stock gestures to convey emotion,
4. the arias were usually *da capo* (ABA in form),
5. the arias had a unity of *affetto/affekt* or "emotion" where they conveyed one emotion or mood for each section of the aria (the middle "B" section often conveyed a contrasting emotion or mood before a returning to the initial *affekt* in the "A" section of the aria),
6. the action of the plot happened during the recitative sections,
7. the chorus was rarely used, and
8. the libretto was based around formulaic entrances and exits of the singers: from one character, building to three, and then back down to one.<sup>53</sup>

In English *opera seria* the focus was on song and not recitative. English audiences preferred less recitative than Italian audiences. As most of the English opera audiences did not speak Italian and only learned about the intricacies of the plot from reading the libretto translations, "many

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<sup>51</sup> Kelly, *First Nights*, 18.

<sup>52</sup> Handel, *Oreste*, XVII.

<sup>53</sup> Hugo Anthony Meynell, *The Art of Handel's Operas* (Lewiston, N.Y.: E. Mellen Press, c1986) 1-18.

spectators paid little attention to the recitative or the plot...and waited for the best songs.”<sup>54</sup> Therefore, imported Italian libretti would often have to be adapted and pared down to streamline the action.

According to Handel expert Winton Dean, “the chief objective of eighteenth-century opera...was to express feelings in music.”<sup>55</sup> There was a necessity for a “clear distinction between recitative and aria.”<sup>56</sup>

Recitative was where the action took place in real time. The aria was basically a “lyrical freeze-frame” to express the emotion.<sup>57</sup> Arias helped the audience understand what the character was thinking or feeling and did not develop the plot per se. Arias were an exposition of a particular emotion (or thought), which subsided to a development of that emotion. The aria would then return to a “re-exposition” of the original emotional state (or thought) of the character. This *da capo* form came to dictate *opera aria* in approximately 1690, so “Handel was taking up a practice already well-established.”<sup>58</sup> The basic format for an *opera seria*, as a whole, was the basic cycle of recitative into aria into recitative into aria.

Expectations of eighteenth-century audiences did not stop with arias, recitatives, and castrati. After London theaters reopened in 1660, women were allowed onstage. At the end of the seventeenth century, it was a novelty to see women onstage; furthermore, cross-dressing women, or

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<sup>54</sup> Kelly, *First Nights*, 28.

<sup>55</sup> Kelly, *First Nights*, 31.

<sup>56</sup> Kelly, *First Nights*, 28.

<sup>57</sup> Kelly, *First Nights*, 28.

<sup>58</sup> Jean Grundy Fanelli, *Opera for Everyone* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2004), 72.

trouser roles, became an even greater lure to the theater than Shakespeare's "skirt roles" (men playing women). From 1660 to 1700, one quarter of the plays written "contained one or more roles calling for actresses to appear in male clothing."<sup>59</sup> Handel was not blind to this trend and therefore wrote trouser roles in almost every opera. In *Oreste*, the role of Philoctetes is one of these "trouser" roles.

Also necessary for eighteenth-century *opera seria* was the use of rhyming verse in the libretti. As shown below, in the text from Iphigenia's aria, "Dirti vorrei" (I would like to tell you) from Act I, scene iii of *Oreste*, the libretto strictly adheres to this expectation.

Dirti vorrei,	<i>I would like to tell you that</i>
Non son crudele	<i>I am not cruel</i>
Ma tu fedele	<i>But you faithfully</i>
Attendi ancor.	<i>Wait again.</i>
De' tuoi sospiri,	<i>Of your sighs,</i>
De tuoi martiri	<i>Of your martyrdom,</i>
Avrà pietade	<i>Have pity</i>
Un di l'Amor.	<i>On Love.</i>

Handel was also aware of the trend of a character comparing oneself (or his/her emotional state) to something in nature in what is called a simile aria. In Iphigenia's (Ifigenia's) aria "Se il caro figlio" (If the dear child) from Act II, scene v, Iphigenia compares herself and Philoctetes (Filotete) to Hircanian tigers. She tells Philoctetes that his heart is "more savage than the tigers." It is interesting to note Iphigenia is comparing herself with a savage beast. The reason for this could be to either contrast the

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<sup>59</sup> Megan Gloss, "Girls Will Be Boys: Wearing the Pants in Opera," *The Classical Singer* 20, no. 11 (November 2007): 10.

nature of her character with Hermione's (Ermione) or to cast a shadow over Iphigenia's pure character. Either way, the unvirtuous and aberrant nature is inherent in a character who commits human sacrifices, whether of her own choosing or not, and this lack of virtue is easily apparent in the simile. Iphigenia's aria is a sublime example of Handel taking advantage of "modern" trends in *opera seria* and answering the expectations of the audience while still hinting at the intrinsic nature of the character singing it. Handel was exceptionally good at fulfilling his audience's expectations and meeting the conventions of *opera seria* because he chose the right subject matter for the right audience at the right time.

### **Political and Religious Apprehensions**

All of Handel's story-based compositions were based on mythology or classical history. Out of 84 of Handel's story-based compositions [56 operas (including 2 unfinished and 12 pasticcis) and 28 oratorios], most were based on myths and legends of antiquity (including Biblical stories). Some examples of his compositions based on classical mythology are: *Daphne* (1708), *Teseo* (1713), *Acis and Galatea* (1718), *Arianna in Creta* (1733), *Oreste* (1734), and *Hercules*. Handel frequently composed operas based on historical characters and events that often paralleled the English monarchy. The plots were set in antiquity or a foreign country, allowing for a safe distance between politics and religion in the story and the current events in eighteenth-century England. Handel's plots focused on intrigue and love interests rather than stories of religious strife and war.



Due to the precarious political climate and drastic social changes occurring in England, Handel needed to satisfy the aristocracy while being careful to not insult his opera patrons from Parliament. Therefore, he became one of the leading diplomatic figures in English culture. His work at the opera house placed him in a position to directly effect social and political changes in England's social elites.<sup>60</sup> According to William Weber, "The opera house represented the main venue [for politics], save the House of Parliament."<sup>61</sup> Thus, politics played a significant part in Handel's selection of librettos. Even though Parliament placed limitations on the British monarch, the aristocracy was still autocratic in many ways, and both constituencies substantially affected Handel's career. Consequently, Handel had both politicians from Parliament, as well as the aristocracy to consider when selecting topics for his operas.

Another issue that complicated Handel's compositions and libretto choices was religion. Religion and politics in England were inextricably linked. The British were extremely sensitive about religion. Therefore, much of English society was wary about the importation of Italian opera to England due to the association between Italy and Catholicism. Since the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, Catholicism was England's political scapegoat. Anything that went wrong, from fires to random acts of violence was determined to be the fault of the few Catholics still remaining

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<sup>60</sup> Weber, "Handel's London," 45.

<sup>61</sup> Weber, "Handel's London," 45.

in England.<sup>62</sup> Handel recognized the danger of mentioning religion in his English works, and therefore, carefully selected librettos or changed plots to adhere to the ruling classes's Protestant perspectives.

Likewise, when Handel chose myths for his librettos, it was common for him to skew or omit aspects of the original source material. The libretto of *Oreste* was written in Rome by Giagualberto Barlocci in 1723 and was adapted by Handel. The Handelian version of *Oreste* flirted with the exoticism of belief in the gods, yet Handel ultimately removed the idea of the gods being real, autonomous, powerful entities. For instance, instead of Artemis appearing to state her wishes and invoke her power, Handel used Iphigenia's personal wishes as the edict and again deflated the power and autonomy of any referenced diety. When Iphigenia wants to stay Orestes's (Oreste's) hand during his fight with Philoctetes, she uses her position as High Priestess to stop the fight rather than praying for the gods' intervention. Iphigenia decreed, "Thus by my voice, the goddess...bids you to cease your rash attempts, and to lay down your sword."<sup>63</sup> In order to de-emphasize religion, Iphigenia is the mouthpiece of her own wishes. In addition, Handel deleted the appearance of Athena in the final resolution of the opera and effectively removed any remnant of "true" belief in the gods. Thus, Handel kept the sanctity of his audience's religious viewpoint by omission.

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<sup>62</sup> Weber, "Handel's London," 50-51.

<sup>63</sup> Handel, *Oreste*, XXXIV.

At the beginning of both the Handel and Barlocchi renditions of the libretto there is a preface called the “Argument,” which includes a written caveat to assure the audience of the author’s admirable intentions. In Barlocchi’s version, the “Argument” explains the Greek religious elements by saying, “the author...assures that any passages that might seem incompatible with the Catholic faith do not represent the author’s personal viewpoint, but result from the author’s need to adapt himself to the mentality of the pagan people presented in the drama; he affirms that he believes all the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.”<sup>64</sup> Although in eighteenth-century Italy it was illegal to mention God or have any subject concerning Christianity in an opera libretto, Barlocchi still found it necessary to explain himself to the society for which he was writing.<sup>65</sup>

Handel took Barlocchi’s “Argument,” written for a Roman audience, and altered it. Not wanting to highlight the differences between the Greeks and contemporary society, he simplified the original and struck all mention of religion from it. Handel also slightly changed the focus of the plot’s backstory by adjusting the words to make it relatable to England’s historical past. For instance, Handel justifies the slaying of Orestes’s mother by changing the words “murdered” to “killed,” making the crime less offensive. He further focuses on the notion that Orestes was justified in the killing because his mother, “Clitemnestra...possess’d the Throne

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<sup>64</sup> George Friedrich Handel, *Oreste: Opera in tre atti*, HWV A11, edited by Bernd Baselt, *Hallische Händel-Ausgabe*, Series II: Opern Supplement, Band 1, (London; New York: Bärenreiter, 1991) XIX.

<sup>65</sup> Dean, *Handel and the Opera Seria*, 11.

contrary to the Right of her Son” and Orestes killed her “to recover his lost Crown.”<sup>66</sup> As an English audience would not understand why Orestes would be upset at something so justifiable, considering the past bloodshed over the English crown for similar reasons, Handel added the side-note that his remorse was over other crimes instead of killing his mother. He said Orestes was tormented with the guilt of his crimes, “having committed others.”<sup>67</sup>

Instead of focusing on Apollo’s mandate of Orestes avenging his father, Handel focused the events of the drama to emphasize the Divine Right of Kings. Although the practice was abandoned in 1689 with the overthrow of James II, it was still an understandable and relatable part of English politics, so much so, that Handel carefully edited the “Argument” to appeal to this particular English principle. Unlike in ancient Greek society, the act of murdering his mother to regain the throne was actually seen as a virtuous act, and not one to feel guilty and remorseful about.

With so many things to consider, the selection of a subject and a libretto was a major undertaking. Handel first needed to select a subject that would serve him well in the fiery socio-political climate of the English aristocracy in order to safeguard his work from critics on both sides. Second, he felt the need to balance his topic selection with the demands of marrying *opera seria* and its conventions.<sup>68</sup> Finally, Handel tried to make

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<sup>66</sup> Handel, *Oreste*, XIX and XXX.

<sup>67</sup> Handel, *Oreste*, XIX.

<sup>68</sup> Rheinhard Strohm, *Essays on Handel and Italian opera*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 35.

sure his music and production were aesthetically pleasing to the public because “the majority of the public were of course less interested in the content of a libretto than in the singing and the production of a work.”<sup>69</sup> Handel’s version of Barlocchi’s libretto *Oreste* answered all three of these concerns.

### **Handel’s Pasticcio Opera**

In the middle of the eighteenth century, *opera seria* was experiencing a wane in popularity in London. This was partly due to the popularity of a ballad opera by John Gay, *The Beggar's Opera* (1728), which was a satire on the genre of *opera seria*; but it was also due, in part, to the feud between Handel and the rival opera company, the Opera of the Nobility, which opened in 1733. Frederick, Prince of Wales, along with some other nobles who opposed George and George II’s rule, also chose to oppose George’s favored composer Handel by opening their own opera company.

The Prince of Wales’s company, called the Opera of the Nobility, opened up in 1733. The Opera of the Nobility recruited Farinelli, the most famous castrato in all of Europe, to sing for them. For some time tensions between Handel and his singers, Senesino and Cuzzoni, had arisen and they ultimately left Handel for the opposition. Thus bolstered by the

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<sup>69</sup> Strohm, *Essays on Handel*, 36.

impressive cast of singers coupled with the backing of nobles and the Prince of Wales, the Opera of the Nobility constituted “a vindictive and well-organized opposition to [Handel].”<sup>70</sup>

As Handel’s contract at the King’s Theatre had ended and the Opera of the Nobility has taken over the opera house in the Haymarket, Handel partnered with impresario John Rich, who was known for his spectacular productions. Rich had just opened the Covent Garden Theatre in 1732 and Handel successfully negotiated two evenings per week for opera in the venue. In 1734, Handel moved to this venue with what was largely a brand new opera company.<sup>71</sup>

Handel’s financial support had waned and he therefore needed to revitalize his popularity. His company was now comprised of new, lesser-known singers, so he needed a platform to showcase the “new” talent of his reformed company in an efficient, expedient manner. Handel chose to write an opera containing his most popular arias in a pasticcio opera, to gain this support and to showcase his new talent at the beginning of the 1735 opera season.<sup>72</sup>

A pasticcio, “pie” or “pasty” in Italian, is an opera that is compiled from previously composed music. Pasticcio operas, or pasticci, were typically compiled with an individual composer’s music used for the entirety of a particular act. For instance, a three act pasticcio opera

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<sup>70</sup> Meynell, *The Art of Handel’s Operas*, 141.

<sup>71</sup> Handel, *Oreste*, XVII.

<sup>72</sup> Anthony Hicks, “Handel, George Frideric,” *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Accessed 20 February 2012, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/40060pg21>. The 1735 opera season began in December 1734.

typically showcased the work of three different composers. Handel composed 12 pasticcio operas during his career. Only 3 of the 12 were comprised entirely of his own works: *Oreste*, HWV A<sup>11</sup> (1734), *Alessandro Severo*, HWV A<sup>13</sup> (1738) and *Giove in Argo*, A<sup>14</sup> (1739).<sup>73</sup> Two purposes for pasticcio were to create a quick “stop-gap” during the opera season, and to train and showcase new artists. In the case of *Oreste*, the latter was the case.<sup>74</sup>

Due to the nature of this genre, *Oreste* was made up of previously composed music overlaid with the new libretto. The arias and overture of *Oreste* were from several different previously successful operas, however the ballet and recitatives were all newly composed. The ballet elements were added to highlight the Sallé’s ballet company, which was also in residence at the Covent Garden Theatre. Handel began incorporating French *tragédie-lyrique* elements into his operas, specifically dance segments at the end of each act, as they appear at the end of each act in *Oreste*.<sup>75</sup> Since these dance elements were new to Handel’s operas, the ballet segments had to be newly composed.

Since *Oreste* was one of Handel’s first operas composed with Greek mythology as the subject, he may have used the subject matter as an experiment to see if it would help him with the feud between himself and

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<sup>73</sup> Donald Burrows, “Handel’s Works,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Handel*, Edited by Donald Burrows (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 332-333.

<sup>74</sup> Reinhard Strohm, *Essays on Handel and Italian opera* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 68.

<sup>75</sup> Handel, *Oreste*, XVII.

'The Opera of the Nobility.'<sup>76</sup> *Oreste* was one of Handel's "political" operas, which typically contained a "full-scale villain, a chivalrous hero, a suffering heroine, and a subsidiary pair of lovers."<sup>77</sup> It contained some of Handel's best compositions. The arias Handel selected for inclusion showcased the following singers in the premiere:

<i>Oreste</i>	Giovanni Carestini	Castrato	(second role)
<i>Ifigenia</i>	Cecilia Young	Soprano	(first role)
<i>Ermione</i>	Anna Strada del Pò	Soprano	(prima donna 1729)
<i>Pilade</i>	John Beard	Tenor	(first role sung)
<i>Filotete</i>	Maria Caterina Negri	Contralto	(second role)
<i>Toante</i>	Gustavus Waltz	Bass	(second role)

Since Handel tailored roles for individual singers, he compared the similar qualities of his old and new singers. For instance, 25 compositions were written for Senesino, whose vocal range was fairly narrow and who preferred to sing on the staff. Handel therefore ensured all Senesino's melismatic passages were in the most impressive part of his range, seven specific notes that did not go above "f" as evidenced by score and compositions written for him. The aria "Un disprezzato affetto" (A Despised Love) from *Ottone*, which was replaced by Handel's pasticcio version for Carestini's "Un interrotto affetto" (A Broken Love) from *Oreste*, shows Senesino's range restrictions. As evidenced here, the arias were written to showcase the individual singer's particular instrument.

Handel's later compositions written specifically for Carestini show that Carestini had a more extended vocal range and had more superior

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<sup>76</sup> Anthony Hicks. "Oreste." *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*. Edited by Stanley Sadie. *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*. Accessed 2 March 2012. <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/article/grove/music/O005280>.

<sup>77</sup> Meynell, "The Art of Handel's Operas," 3.



vocal flexibility than Senesino. Nonetheless, the music selected for Orestes was taken from Senesino's repertoire. Carestini, singing music written for Senesino, was the perfect opportunity for Handel to show that the new castrato Carestini could sing the same music as his former *primo uomo* and he could sing it better.

Handel did not just tailor the music for his operas to fit Senesino's voice, but also to fit the prima donna's voice as well. Francesca Cuzzoni was the prima donna of the Royal Academy where she sang in 11 of Handel's operas from 1723 until 1728. Her remarkable voice was "angelic in its clarity...[she had] a smooth legato...perfect portamento...equality of the registers...perfect trills...perfect execution...perfect intonation...[and] her singing was sublime and rare."<sup>78</sup> Cuzzoni was most famous for her cantabile singing, excelling at slow and rapid airs. Her range was from middle 'c' to 'b' above the staff and Handel wrote to amplify "the effectiveness of her sound...[giving] her long sustained, legato passages often with intense suspensions and dissonances."<sup>79</sup> The aria "Mi lagnerò tacendo" (I languish in silence) from *Siroe*, and later from *Oreste*, was written specifically for Cuzzoni. It is indicative of her range and cantible singing which also would have been appropriate for Cecilia Young when Handel selected this aria for the role of Iphigenia.

Due to the fact that castrati were in high demand, composers did not favor the natural male tenor voice. For instance, in one of Handel's

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<sup>78</sup> Emerson, *Five Centuries of Women Singers*, 60.

<sup>79</sup> Emerson, *Five Centuries of Women Singers*, 61-62.

most successful operas, *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* (1724), almost half the cast were castrati (three out of the eight roles). The use of acceptable natural male voice was reserved for bass or baritone roles which were usually relegated to the least heroic roles, the villains or elderly king figures. Compared to *Giulio Cesare*, *Oreste's* casting was significantly different. The role of the natural male voice, specifically the tenor voice, started to make an appearance in Handel's scores. Although the *primo uomo* roles in opera were still reserved for the castrati, the glory of portraying a virtuous heroic male, was no longer reserved for just castrati, but tenors like John Beard. Another possible reason for the shift to natural male voices in oratorio may have been simply because Handel's oratorios were written in English and many castratos did not speak much English. Whatever the reason may have been, Handel wrote the heroic title roles of his oratorios *Samson* (1743), *Judas Maccabaeus* (1746) and *Jephtha* (1752) for Beard. His premiere performance with Handel was in *Oreste*.<sup>80</sup>

### **Factors Affecting Plot and Score Development**

*Oreste*, based on Barlocchi's libretto *L'Oreste*, premiered at the Covent Garden Theatre 18 December 1734. Barlocchi's libretto was based on Euripides's *Iphigenia in Tauris*. Although it was based on Euripides, some of the most important aspects of the plot were altered to support the infusion of additional love interests and intrigue. For instance, the classical Greek "Recognition Scene" was removed from the story. Instead,

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<sup>80</sup> H. Diack Johnstone, "Handel's London – British musicians and London concert life" in *The Cambridge Companion to Handel*, edited by Donald Burrows (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 75.

Iphigenia knew that Orestes was her brother upon her first meeting, even though she kept the secret from him. This was perhaps to empower Iphigenia's character and to ennoble her with the power of information or to place more focus on Orestes at the end of the opera in the final scene.

In Euripidean drama, there was always an extensive prologue giving the backstory. In the Greek comedies of Menander, the extensive florid prologue encompassed a brief greeting, a statement of the setting, and a summary of the plot. Menander was a Greek New Comedy playwright who owed much of his form and conventions to the Roman playwrights Plautus and Terence. In comedy, supernatural beings most often were the bearers of this information. In French theatre, English masques, and Shakespearean plays, Plautus's comedic model was employed.<sup>81</sup> In Handel's libretti, however, he chose to have Prologues written as the "Argument" in the playbill because the conventions of eighteenth-century Italian *opera seria* left little room for Greek or Roman Prologues.

Although Prologues were not easily facilitated, *opera seria* often included Greek comedy's model of having a banquet or celebration onstage or at least a mention of one offstage. *Opera seria* plots include this ancient convention in many operas; Handel, however, did not choose to incorporate this into many if any of his. He chose rather to end his operas with an aria by the *primo uomo*, or heroic male, followed by a chorus of

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<sup>81</sup> Coulter, "The Plautine Tradition," 67.

joy and/or reconciliation.<sup>82</sup> This choice reflects the *opera seria* singer's crowning achievement for florid vocal display and also illustrates the importance of the heroic male and his dominance in Handel's operas. The final aria displayed the most noble and virtuous traits in the character.

Likewise, in agreement with ancient Greek models, many of the female roles in *Oreste* were relegated to beauty and grace and were subordinate to the heroic male role, Orestes. Yet, Iphigenia is displayed with intelligence and conviction, exhibiting male heroic virtue in the Greek sense, while Orestes is emotional and unbalanced. In antiquity he would be considered quite feminine based on his emotional outbursts. Handel's characters were frequently portrayed contrary to what their gender role called for: "his heroes stricken with misfortune, his soldiers were defeated, his lovers jilted, wives widowed or abandoned, his young women frail, if not by social standards positively vicious."<sup>83</sup> Handel thrived on these juxtapositions in his operas because he possessed, "the rare gift of portraying men and women in a state of spiritual growth or decline."<sup>84</sup> This way, the main character who does not initially meet society's expectations of virtue but becomes virtuous over the course of the opera.

Societal expectations were important factors in the design of Handel's operas. One expectation of the English audience was that stories for the theatre should contain love affairs with conflicts and resolutions

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<sup>82</sup> Coulter, "The Plautine Tradition," 72-73.

<sup>83</sup> Winton Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1959), 43.

<sup>84</sup> Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios*, 43.

pertaining to them. This expectation, which was present in the ever-popular Shakespearean plays of the English society, stemmed from Greek drama. Cornelia C. Coulter explains that “the balancing of one love affair by another, the portrayal of contrasted characters, and the presentation of such problems as the conflict between love and duty or love and friendship, all have parallels in Plautus and Terence,” as well as Menander’s Greek comedies.<sup>85</sup>

As already discussed, the philosophic and romantic themes exploited in opera harken back to Plautine tradition of comedy, and even in ancient times were infused with the morality of the society for which they were written. The juxtapositions between the characters, the romantic plots, and the florid music and conventions of *opera seria*, served as Handel’s springboard for the plot and the music of *Oreste*.

Although Barlocchi’s libretto was a starting point for this opera, it is no surprise Handel altered it since the words had to fit Handel’s music and still provide musical fluidity and a cohesive dramatic impact.<sup>86</sup> Therefore, none of the aria texts from Barlocchi’s original libretto were kept, and Handel created his own texts to fit the pieces he selected for the opera. Since the female and male roles from one opera to the next were basically the same in both role and virtue, translating one character and his or her associate texts to those in *Oreste*, was quite simple. Handel first chose

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<sup>85</sup> Coulter, “The Plautine Tradition,” 75.

<sup>86</sup> Hugo Anthony Meynell. *The Art of Handel's Operas*. Lewiston, N.Y. : E. Mellen Press, c1986, xviii-xvii.

arias and contexts whose musical qualities and texts fit the story in *Oreste*, and thus required little if any change in texts. Then, if texts needed to be altered, Handel added new text.

An example of Handel merely substituting an aria in place of another from *Oreste* is Iphigenia's aria called "Mi lagnerò, tacendo." This aria was originally Laodice's aria from *Siroe* (1728). Laodice, in antiquity, was another name for Agamemnon's daughter Electra, making the role association quite fitting since, in name they were sisters. In *Siroe*, Laodice was a strong-willed mistress to the King of Persia but was in love with the Prince of Persia, Siroe. The difference between the two characters is quite astonishing; however, the sentiment of the aria is closely linked. Laodice, after having begged Cosroe for Siroe's life, sings "Mi lagnerò tacendo" as her moment of reflection on Siroe's execution. The context of this aria parallels Iphigenia's plea for Orestes's life and fits perfectly as her moment of reflection on Orestes's execution. The text and the delicate string orchestration were a perfect match for this graceful plea in *Oreste*, despite the unvirtuous nature of Laodice's character in *Siroe*. For *Oreste*, Handel rewrote the recitative preceding "Mi lagnerò tacendo," and simply inserted the already composed music and text into Barlocchi's libretto.<sup>87</sup> Much of *Oreste* was composed and compiled in the same fashion as "Mi lagnerò tacendo." Handel chose the music for *Oreste* from *Rodrigo* (1707),

*Agrippina* (1710), *Terpsichore* (1712), *Radamisto* (1720), *Floridante*

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<sup>87</sup> George Friederic Handel, *Siroe, re di Persia: Opera in tre atti*, HWV 24, from *The Works of George Friederich Handel*, printed for the German Handel Society, v. 73 (Ridgewood, NJ: Gregg Press, 1965), 40-43; and Handel, *Oreste*, 112-115.

(1721), *Ottone* (1723), *Tamerlano* (1724), *Riccardo* (1727), *Siroe* (1728), *Lotario* (1729), *Partenope* (1730), *Sosarme* (1732), and *Arianna in Creta* (1734).<sup>88</sup>

As previously noted, Handel had to meet numerous expectations when compiling the music for *Oreste*. He needed to devise a careful plan and libretto consisting of entrance and exit arias for all characters and needed to ensure all aria requirements were met. Aria requirements were essentially that the *primo uomo* and *prima donna* were to have the most arias in contrasting styles and emotions. The rest of the cast would be given fewer arias than the principle characters.<sup>89</sup> Orestes had six arias and Hermione and Iphigenia had five each. To set Hermione apart from Iphigenia, she was also given a duet to be sung with Orestes. Contrasting emotions were also important to distinguish since two "rage" arias could not be sung back to back. Handel paid particular attention to exit arias because, as was tradition with *opera seria*, the plot was basically "a series of emotional crises that provoke beautiful arias" in succession until no one is left onstage.<sup>90</sup> According to the fashion, the singers had frequent encores; hence, a singer needed to exit in order to return for a second performance of his/her aria.<sup>91</sup>

Due to the fact that these libretto and aria requirements were expected in all *opera seria*, an audience member might become bored of

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<sup>88</sup> Handel, *Oreste*, 7-8.

<sup>89</sup> Kelly, *First Nights*, 38-39.

<sup>90</sup> Kelly, *First Nights*, 38.

<sup>91</sup> Kelly, *First Nights*, 32.

the same form over and over again. In *Oreste*, there were 24 arias (mostly *da capo*) and 1 duet. The number of arias was significantly cut compared to his other operas like *Giulio Cesare* which had up to 40 arias, making for approximately 4 hours of music.<sup>92</sup> Handel attempted to enliven his composition by leaving out expected ritornellos or by adding music or sinfonias where they were not typically placed.

The English preferred shorter recitatives, so Handel cut the recitatives from Barlocchi's libretto by two-thirds in length from 1110 lines of text to 412 lines.<sup>93</sup> Although these cuts seemed drastic when compared to Handel's other operas where the shortening of recitatives often made the action unintelligible, the concise dramatic action lent to the heroism of the characters and drove the plot toward the climax in Act III, "with an urgency seldom found in Handel's London opera libretti."<sup>94</sup> Handel "fused aria and recitative, either by running one into the other without a cadence or by incorporating stretches of recitative within the aria structure."<sup>95</sup> For example, in the aria "Where Shall I Fly?" from *Hercules*, the recitative starts as a secco recitative, alternates between secco and accompagnato, and then is fused to the aria with the use of overlapping cadences and elision. Unfortunately, because of the pasticcio nature of *Oreste*, Handel

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<sup>92</sup> Patrick Giles, "The Baroque Renegade: Conductor John Nelson has Earned Admirers and Enemies Alike by Lending a Modern Sensibility to Early Works," *Opera News* 63, no. 10 (April 1999): 42-45.

<sup>93</sup> Handel, *Oreste*, XX.

<sup>94</sup> Handel, *Oreste*, X.

<sup>95</sup> Dean, *Handel and the Opera Seria*, 169.



took a more economical approach and did not include many of the innovative techniques he incorporated in some of his later works.

### **Characterization**

In *Oreste*, role characterization concerning virtue and gender roles was fairly simple and was often based on the choices Handel made concerning the libretto. Handel chose to change the focus of Euripides's story, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, from the female lead to Orestes, the male lead. The change was most likely due to the *primo uomo* being the star of *opera seria* with all other roles being secondary to the castrato's. Handel might have wanted to follow the expected trend of focusing on the heroic male character so he could focus on the task at hand: showcasing his new talent in the most fashionable and expedient manner.

Although the heroic male was the focus, Handel chose to compliment this character with a mate. For *Oreste*, he gave the title role a wife, Hermione. Some ancient Greek myths mention Hermione as the daughter of Menelaus and Helen. In the myth she does marry her first cousin, Orestes; however, the timeline does not quite match the events in Handel's rendition as they were married after the Trojan War, but only after Orestes fled Epirus. In addition, Hermione is in no way affiliated with the events of the Euripides's version. In contrast, Handel's Hermione arrives in Tauris already married to Orestes and their fates and stories intertwine in this new rendition.

Accuracy in myth was not the focus for creating operas at this time. Handel was not looking for accuracy, rather he sought a means to display the amorous relations between men and women on stage in order to satisfy the trend in *opera seria*. The addition of Hermione as the heroic male's wife however, does give insight into the vital role of marriage in English society. According to eighteenth-century literature regarding culture, men were incomplete without a wife. In order to be a virtuous man, a man must have a wife, and thus, Handel mirrored these cultural trends in his operas.

Another interesting aspect about how male virtue and gender roles were portrayed in *Oreste* is the depiction of Thoas (Toante). Thoas's role is that of the braggart soldier, the most frequent type of stock character to appear in the ancient theater. The Greeks called this character a classical *miles* (soldier) character who is lauded by peers for military prowess and his ability to woo women; nevertheless, he lacks the ability to actually fulfill either reputation.

Throughout the generations of English literature and drama, this *miles* character was one of the most beloved types of characters for the English, and includes one of the most famous examples: Shakespeare's Falstaff. The humor and irony that embodied the character delighted audiences, playwrights and even later, composers like Giuseppe Verdi. In accordance with classical Greek *miles* character traits, Thoas displays "his boastfulness when no perils threaten, and his cowardice in the face of

danger, his ambition to be a lady-killer, and his ignominious end.”<sup>96</sup> Male virtue of the ancient Greeks and male virtue of the eighteenth century are in agreement that Thoas is the antithesis to the heroic male figure.

The Greeks found that this character can be forgiven his faults and that he can be changed by the gods’ power. For example, in Euripides’s version of *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Thoas, being humbled by Athena’s show of power, submits to her divine will and frees the Greek slaves. In both Handel’s and Gluck’s operas based on this myth, Thoas is not so pardonable and rightfully is killed at the end of the operas. Handel and Gluck may have chosen this option to heighten the dramatic impact of the opera with a fight to the death right at the denouement. Further, the audiences desired poetic justice in the downfall of a tyrant, especially in England with their recent history under tyrannical rule by the monarchy. The decision to punish Thoas reflects an austere view about being unvirtuous and lacking basic good character; for those lacking virtue, the penalty is death.

In *Oreste*, women are initially depicted as virtuous, weak and dependent upon men. At the beginning of the opera, Iphigenia enlists Philoctetes’s help when, under the given circumstances, she could have easily protected Orestes by herself. Being the powerful High Priestess of the Temple as in the Euripides version, she would have power and control over all things concerning the temple. In *Oreste*, Handel strips Iphigenia

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<sup>96</sup> Coulter, “The Plautine Tradition,” 80.

of the power behind her title because it would not have been appropriate or palatable for men of the eighteenth century to be governed by women, even with Great Britain's history of Elizabeth I's rule from 1558-1603. It was the convention in British society that a woman could not act without a man to do the action for her, or at the very least, she needed to obtain a man's approval before acting on her own.

The depiction that women could not, or should not, act alone is made even more apparent when comparing the Handelian version with the Euripides version. In Euripides, Iphigenia is fairly self-sufficient and intelligent. As high priestess she freely gives advice to the men in the story, and her advice is taken under advisement. She is respected and her actions require no approval of men save the removal of the statue from Tauris. Throughout the storyline, Euripides portrays Iphigenia as a graceful and refined woman, and her advice and actions are not forceful. Iphigenia was also the mastermind behind the Orestes and Pylades (Pilade) escape plan. Although this display of intellect and cleverness contradicts female Greek virtue, it was apparent that the display of this male Greek virtue was admirable to Orestes and Pylades when they followed her plan without question.

On the contrary, in Handel's version, the women were not depicted as self-sufficient or clever. For instance, although Hermione arrives without her husband on the shores of Tauris, Handel ensures she is not inappropriately independent and thus she is accompanied by Pylades. A

woman would not have traveled alone, and at the very least, would have had servants accompanying her. In Greek society, a woman traveling alone and with a man who was not a household member would have been scandalous. Such a woman would have been seen as immoral and unvirtuous.

Although there are distinct differences between Handel's and Euripides's depictions of women, for the most part, the distinction is not severe. Women in the eighteenth century were similar to ancient Greeks in that the ideal woman was "humble and modest from reason and conviction, submissive from choice, and obedient from inclination...she makes it her business to serve, and her pleasure to oblige her husband."<sup>97</sup> And according to Leslie Reinhardt, there was also an "underlying fear that women had innate, unruly passions—in sexuality, independent behavior, and dress—so threatening to the social order that they must continually be countered and curbed."<sup>98</sup> Eighteenth-century virtues of humility, modesty, and obedience were all female virtues in antiquity.

Handel depicted Iphigenia as a delicate, frail, sweet young woman who was the epitome of all that was virtuous in the eighteenth century. Iphigenia's behavior was extremely virtuous according to both ancient Greek and eighteenth-century values until towards the end of the opera when her behavior became questionable. Iphigenia started to exhibit a

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<sup>97</sup> Leslie Reinhardt, "Serious Daughters: Dolls, Dress, and Female Virtue in the Eighteenth Century," *American Art* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 32-33, accessed 31 July 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/507499>.

<sup>98</sup> Reinhardt, "Serious Daughters," 33-34.

strong, almost forceful character in stark contrast to the fragility of her character at the beginning of the opera. As the action progressed, so did her character. Her actions became less and less refined; the conviction of her actions became deliberate and almost caustic. For instance, in the final scene of the opera, while holding the sacrificial knife, she threatened to kill Thoas. Although this action was justifiable, it was still considered an unvirtuous and shocking action for a woman to take. This drastic change in the story was probably intended to shock not only the audience, but also to heighten the drama.

These differences between the refined account of Iphigenia in Euripides's version and Handel's progressive version of her character, was possibly due, at least in part, to Handel's desire to highlight the strength of his new *prima donna*, Cecilia Young. Considering Handel's tense relationship with the singers at the Opera of the Nobility, it is logical that he would want to show Young as a force to be reckoned with.

This musical finesse Handel wrote into the role of Iphigenia was delightful and was an example of his remarkable ability to take the text and character of a role and marry them perfectly with his music. According to C. Steven LaRue:

“in virtually all his arias...Handel's care with the setting of individual words or phrases is apparent. By means of word repetition, the association of specific words with specific musical ideas, the emphasis on a particular word or phrase by means of

extensive melismas, and the use of word painting, Handel could both manipulate and clarify the musico-dramatic meaning of his aria texts.”<sup>99</sup>

Although cultural context and libretto choices were ways in which Handel portrayed gender roles and virtue, Handel’s word painting and melodic line also portrayed Iphigenia as a delicate, graceful and virtuous woman. When compared to Hermione, Iphigenia “is portrayed with a more maiden-like grace; her vocal lines are more lyrical in nature, and her strongly-motivated decision to oppose Thoas is underscored by Handel with the use of finely differentiated recitatives.”<sup>100</sup>

In addition, the timbre of Handel’s chosen instrumentation aided in painting the nature of the characters. In *Oreste*, arias were generally accompanied by strings, and in some instances, the oboe. The oboe was the instrument of choice for accompanying Young with poignant and bittersweet texts, because it closely matched her voice in timbre; as illustrated in Iphigenia’s aria, “Sento nell’alma” (I feel withing my soul).<sup>101</sup> When oboes were included in the texture, Handel usually restricted them to just being used in the ritornellos because he did not want them to compete with the voice. Frequently, the violins and oboes doubled each other.<sup>102</sup> Handel reserved oboes for melodic passages in the overture and

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<sup>99</sup> C. Steven LaRue, “Handel and the aria,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Handel*, edited by Donald Burrows (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 118.

<sup>100</sup> Handel, *Oreste*, XXIII.

<sup>101</sup> Fanelli, *Opera for Everyone*, 70.

<sup>102</sup> Mark W. Stahura, “Handel and the Orchestra,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Handel*, edited by Donald Burrows (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 246.

to accompany the voice. Gender roles, virtue, and dramatic effects using specific instruments were not as prevalent in *Oreste* as in *Iphigénie en Tauride* and in *Elektra*.

Since many of the arias in *Oreste* had to depict newly-written female roles rather than the original male roles, and because Handel did not have specific audible cues like instruments with which to depict them, he had to find an innovative way to make the arias fit the new role context. Handel changed the textures, tempos, and word painting of the arias in order to transform the gender of the role. In “Sento nell’alma,” Iphigenia’s Act II aria, she sings a sweet sentimental text about a tender love that delights her soul. The aria was originally titled “Lucide stelle” (Bright Stars) from *Rodrigo* (1707) and was sung by Evanco, one of the most virtuous and heroic of the male characters in *Rodrigo*. Evanco was originally a trouser role sung by a soprano. As Evanco was heroic and masculine, Handel had to alter the composition to reflect the grace and beauty of Iphigenia’s female role in *Oreste*.<sup>103</sup> The way Handel transformed this heroic male aria was to embellish the aria with ritornelli and motivic complexity. “Sento nell’alma” was longer and had a unifying adagio at the end of each solo section to sweeten the piece and make it more emotional, plaintive and “softer.” The words were changed in the *Oreste* version and the text chosen to accompany Handel’s word painting changed the emotional impact and meaning of the coloratura. The text and

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<sup>103</sup> George Friederic Handel, *Rodrigo (Vincer se stesso è la maggior vittoria): opera in tre atti*, HWV 5, edited by Rainer Heyink, *Hallische Händel-Ausgabe*, Series II: Opern, v. 2, Band 2 (London; New York: Bärenreiter, 2007), 171-173; and Handel, *Oreste*, 78-81.



its setting enhanced the differences between the gender of the characters. Evanco's version of the aria, when compared to Iphigenia's, is truncated, deliberate, and direct.

Evanco's text, "voi reggete il destin di questo cor," or "you rule the destiny of this heart," is contrasted with Iphigenia's text "già prepara diletto a questo cor," or "already delights this heart." The words "rule the destiny" evoke a masculine heroic quality, while "already delights" evokes a softer, sweeter, and more feminine quality. Handel underlined the text "diletto questo cor" with laughing triplet figures and dotted rhythms. The word painting of this new text setting seems as though Handel's music was originally written to highlight Iphigenia's words and character. The new text painting is not awkwardly set and meshes well with the music. The additions to the score enhance Iphigenia's femininity and character.<sup>104</sup>

## **Legacy**

The premiere performance of *Oreste* occurred during the decline of Italian opera in England; however, it was a shining example of Italian *opera seria* at its best. Handel appealed to London's sophisticated character, as eighteenth-century London prided itself in being the center of culture and commerce for all of Europe. Fittingly, Handel provided this cosmopolitan culture a lovely compendium of the best of Europe: an Italian opera libretto, set to music by a German composer, which began with a French overture and was performed to an English audience by

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<sup>104</sup> Handel, *Rodrigo*, 171-173; and Handel, *Oreste*, 78-81.

English, German, and Italian instrumentalists and singers.<sup>105</sup> Through his compelling libretto and selection of music to compliment it, Handel was able to create drama “within the most orthodox da capo framework,” because he knew how to bend and manipulate *opera seria* and its conventions to appeal to the tastes and expectations of his audience, as well as to the tastes and expectations of its musicians.<sup>106</sup>

By first carefully selecting a famous Greek myth with which Londoners would immediately be familiar and matching it with a pastiche of music from his most successful operas, Handel was able to showcase his new talent and gain supporters for his opera company at the Covent Garden Theatre. Orestes, as a character, appealed to English sensibilities, while the myth Handel chose was reminiscent of English history and a period of political instability stemming from monarchical rule. In addition, through his careful crafting of the libretto, Handel was able to appease the religious and political viewpoints of his emotionally-charged audience.

Concerning the characterization of Iphigenia, Handel carefully pushed the threshold of what was acceptable, appropriate, and virtuous female behavior while still adhering to the norms of contemporary society. He appealed to the English society’s expectations for male and female virtue, where the graceful frailty of Iphigenia and Hermione was set in

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<sup>105</sup> Kelly, *First Nights*, 3.

<sup>106</sup> Dean, *Handel and the Opera Seria*, 184.

contrast to the heroic nature of Orestes and villainy of Thoas. Iphigenia not only adheres to ideal female Greek virtues, but also appeals to the ideal eighteenth-century English virtues and gender roles.

Unfortunately, in spite of Handel's care with the libretto and the universal appeal of the myth, *Oreste* was not as well received as he hoped. The premiere was enthusiastically received and attended by King George II and Queen Caroline; however, after the initial performance, there were only two other performances in Handel's lifetime.<sup>107</sup> *Oreste* is still not considered a part of the standard operatic repertoire in contemporary music circles and is usually omitted from Handel's complete works lists and books written about his operas.

Scholars and opera companies have not given *Oreste* the attention it deserves due to its pasticcio nature. Nevertheless, *Oreste* is a shining example of Handel's well-crafted eighteenth-century heroic opera, which depicts its heroes and heroines and their virtue and gender roles in a concise, yet refined way. According to Bernd Baselt, "the libretto [of *Oreste* was] dramaturgically one of the strongest Handel ever set to music, and its conclusion one of the most incredible."<sup>108</sup> Despite its reception then and its lack of inclusion in Handel's repertoire now, Handel's setting of *Iphigenia in Tauris*, enriches our spectrum of operas based on Greek myth and demonstrates the legacy of the Atreus myth in opera.

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<sup>107</sup> Handel, *Oreste*, XXIV.

<sup>108</sup> Handel, *Oreste*, XVIII.

## Chapter 4

### *IPHIGÉNIE EN TAURIDE* (1779)

#### **Christoph Willibald von Gluck**

Christoph Willibald von Gluck was a German composer of Italian and French opera and composed works for Milan, Turin, Crema, Venice, Vienna, London, Rome, Prague, and Paris. The majority of his operas were written for Vienna and Paris. In Vienna, he became Kapellmeister and Imperial Court Composer. According to Patricia Howard, Vienna, “musically, was an Italian city with Italian composers and singers taking first place in church and court performances.”<sup>109</sup> Gluck, like Handel, had to master the Italian style of opera to be successful in this richly Italian-influenced city. He used the librettos of Pietro Metastasio, the Viennese Imperial Court Poet, and was influenced by the reforms established by Metastasio’s predecessor, Apostolo Zeno. Zeno’s and later Metastasio’s reforms led to opera librettos being written on historical subjects rather than mythological subjects because they more readily conformed to the style of *opera seria*, courtly behavior, and social virtues inherent in the culture at the time.<sup>110</sup>

Gluck was extremely successful in adapting to the cultures for which he wrote, resulting in substantial financial success from the beginning of his career and continuing throughout his life. Unlike Handel,

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<sup>109</sup> Patricia Howard, *Gluck and the Birth of Modern Opera* (London: Barrie and Rockliff 1963), 2.

<sup>110</sup> Howard, *Gluck and the Birth of Modern Opera*, 2-3.

Gluck never had to concern himself with money when composing operas, and was successful throughout Europe, and in particular, France. His French successes were in part due to Calzabigi's French influence. Calzabigi was a poet whom Gluck used later in his life to write his French libretti, and who, along with Count Durazzo, formed an "anti-Metastasio clique [credited] with the reform of opera."<sup>111</sup> Gluck used many Metastasian librettos until he took on Calzabigi's French influenced librettos starting in 1754. The most remarkable Calzabigi librettos were the basis for Gluck's reform operas: *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762), *Paride ed Elena* (1770), and *Alceste* (1776). Calzabigi's French influence in his Italian librettos was readily apparent, especially in the arrangement of the first act of *Orfeo ed Euridice*, as Calzabigi had a "fairly extensive knowledge of the French stage."<sup>112</sup> Also evident in *Orfeo ed Euridice*, was Jean-Philippe Rameau's influence on the music of Gluck's opening chorus. Gluck heard Rameau's operas on his way to London in 1745, and they had a great impact on his choral writing.<sup>113</sup>

After Gluck's initial collaboration with Calzabigi, he chose to work with French librettists Leblanc du Roullet and Nicolas-François Guillard on his operas for Paris. His new reform operas took the former, Metastasian style librettos and tradition of *opera seria* and instilled the following reforms:

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<sup>111</sup> Howard, *Gluck and the Birth of Modern Opera*, 6.

<sup>112</sup> Howard, *Gluck and the Birth of Modern Opera*, 8.

<sup>113</sup> Howard, *Gluck and the Birth of Modern Opera*, 8-9.

1. there was more chorus involvement,
2. the overture added to the emotion of the work or setup of the dramatic action,
3. there was less distinction between recitative and aria and recitatives were frequently *accompagnato* instead of *secco*,
4. the plots were simplified and there were fewer characters,
5. subplots were removed and were focused once again on Greek mythology,
6. there were simple lyrical melodies focusing on the drama of the story rather than on the florid embellishment and virtuosity of the singers,
7. elements of dance and ballet were frequently added to operas, and
8. the opera was no longer an opera by the numbers, rather a continuous flow of music infused story.<sup>114</sup>

Gluck's opera reforms began with his collaboration with Calzabigi in *Orfeo ed Euridice* and continued for the rest of his life. Gluck, having found success with *Iphigénie en Aulide* (1774), revisited the subject of the Iphigenia myths when he composed *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1779), which is arguably the pinnacle of Gluck's reform operas. Of the 46 operas and ballets, including his adaptations, 70 percent were based on Greek myths to include *Antigono* (1756), *Les Amours de Flor et Zéphire* (1759), *La Corona* (1765), and *Echo et Narcisse* (1780).

Handel greatly influenced Gluck, so much so that Gluck chose to study and emulate Handel's late arias in his own reform operas, like *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1779). One morning, after the famous tenor Michael Kelly finished a coaching with Gluck, Gluck showed him a portrait of Handel hanging in Gluck's bedroom and said "[let me] introduce you to one whom, all my life, I have made my study and endeavored to imitate...I

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<sup>114</sup> Howard, *Gluck and the Birth of Modern Opera*, 1-34.

look upon him with reverential awe.”<sup>115</sup> Gluck’s reverence of Handel is readily apparent in Gluck’s use of *recitativo accompagnato*, or accompanied recitative rather than *secco recitativo*, or “dry” unaccompanied recitative. Handel, in his later works at Covent Garden, experimented with making the transition from recitative into aria more fluid in order to heighten the drama. For instance, in the previously mentioned aria “Where Shall I Fly?,” Handel alluded to a through-composed style with motivic elements providing the foundation for the piece. He elided the recitative with the aria and made several other musical elisions linking different material in the piece. Further, the recitative alternates between *secco* and *accompagnato* styles to emphasize the text. Due to the dramatic nature of the recitative, the emotional and mental state of Dejanira, and the repetition of some motivic material from the recitative in the aria, Handel elided the two.

Gluck used the same techniques in the recitatives in the storm scene at the beginning of Act I of *Iphigénie en Tauride*. The recitative is *accompagnato* and alternates between Iphigenia (Iphigénie) and the Greek chorus of Priestesses in a tempestuous array of desperation and heightened emotionalism. Likewise, Gluck paints the storm and fury of Artemis (Diane) in the accompanimental strings in the Act IV aria “Je t’implore et je tremble” (I implore and tremble before you). His word painting is similar to Handel’s. On the words “la voix plaintive et

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<sup>115</sup> Ernest Newman, *Gluck and the Opera: A Study in Musical History* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1964), 23.

lamentable” (a plaintive and sorrowful voice) as well as on the words “je tremble” (I tremble), the voice part descends into the lowest part of the voice to evoke the anxiety, fear, and sadness of the text. Extravagant leaping in the vocal line also suggests despair indicative of wailing or crying out.<sup>116</sup>

Similarly, “Where shall I Fly?” is an example of how Handel’s accompanimental figures supported the emotionalism and essence of the drama. For instance, in the recitative on the words “fatal error” the harmony is jarring and dissonant. There are also numerous “flying” figures to reflect the flight and anger of the furies. In m. 54-56, the “shade of blackest night” descends into the lowest part of the singer’s range as if to emulate the descent into hell. Chromatic leaps on the words “what yellings rend my tortured ear” create a jarring effect and the sixteenth-note rhythmic ostinato which is present when the word “pursuing” is mentioned serves as a figurative display of the pursuing furies in the orchestra.<sup>117</sup>

Gluck’s compositional style of Iphigenia’s music is a direct descendant of Handel’s mature compositional style and exceptional word painting. Iphigenia’s music is filled with variation and detail, and in its break with tradition and convention is therefore unique and revolutionary,

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<sup>116</sup> George Friederic Handel, *Hercules: An oratorio with English text (Kalmus Classic Edition)*, (New York: Alfred Publishing, 1985); and Christoph Willibald von Gluck, *Iphigénie en Tauride: Tragédie Opéra*, libretto by Nicolas-François Guillard, vocal score by Jürgen Sommer, German translation by Peter Schmidt (Kassel, Germany: Bärenreiter, 1983).

<sup>117</sup> Handel, *Hercules*.



just as Handel's music was in *Hercules. Iphigénie en Tauride*'s storm scene and "Je t'implore et je tremble" are just two of the many corollaries of Handel's influence on Gluck.

Jean-Baptiste Lully also greatly influenced Gluck, who studied Lully's scores and took from them the "noble simplicity, a natural melody, and dramatic intentions" of his compositions.<sup>118</sup> Gluck clearly prepared to compose not only for the German, Italian and English audiences, but also the French. In Rome, Gluck fortuitously met Bailli du Roullet who was the Viennese French Ambassador and also an amateur librettist. Gluck and Roullet decided to collaborate on a new production for the Paris theatre called *Iphigénie en Aulide* (1774) in an attempt to emulate Lully and *tragédie-lyrique*, while incorporating Gluck's new opera reforms. Upon Roullet's and Gluck's return to Vienna, Gluck started composing music to Roullet's libretto, while Roullet corresponded with Antoine Dauvergne of the Académie Royale de Musique in order to obtain production rights for Gluck's opera in Paris. In his 1 August 1772, letter Roullet contended that Gluck:

"having written more than forty Italian operas which have had the greatest success in every theatre where the language is admitted, is convinced, through thoughtful study of the ancients and moderns, and by profound meditation in his art, that the Italians in their dramatic creations have departed from the true path; that the French style is the true one for the musical drama; that if this has not yet attained to true perfection, it is less because of the talents of the French musicians...than through the authors of the poems, who,

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<sup>118</sup> Newman, *Gluck and the Opera*, 112-113.

not understanding the capacity of music, have in their compositions preferred wit to sentiment, gallantry to passion, the charm and colour of versification to the pathos of style and situation.”<sup>119</sup>

Through his appeals, Gluck claimed he would be able to compose an opera to appease the French aesthetic and unite both sides of the 1752 *Querelle des Bouffons*.<sup>120</sup> In addition, Gluck claimed to be able to satiate the French desire for traditional ballet by inserting ballet into his operas. *Iphigénie en Aulide* was granted a French audience and was tremendously successful.

Since *Iphigénie en Aulide* was so well received and perhaps in part because of the influence of the King's Austrian wife, Marie Antoinette, who was Gluck's former pupil, Louis XVI offered Gluck a commission to compose six new operas for the French theatre. For these French commissions Gluck took Rameau's French choral writing, the French ballet, and Lully's penchant for simple elegant melody and incorporated them with Handel's and Calzabigi's compositional and libretto techniques. Through this melding of styles, Gluck united both the French and Italian aesthetics. His most successful attempt at this unification, which also integrated his reforms, was *Iphigénie en Tauride*.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Newman, *Gluck and the Opera*, 112-114.

<sup>120</sup> Christoph Willibald von Gluck, "Letter to the Editor of the "Mercure de France," in *Source Readings in Music History: From Classical Antiquity through the Romantic Era*, edited by Oliver Strunk (New York: Princeton University Press 1950), 681-683. The *Querelle des Bouffons* was a philosophical music controversy occurring in Paris, France, between 1752 and 1754 concerning the merits of French and Italian opera.

<sup>121</sup> Howard, *Gluck and the Birth of Modern Opera*, 102.

## Libretto and Orchestral Scoring

*Iphigénie en Tauride* was one of Gluck's finest reform operas and premiered at Paris Opéra in May, 1779. The libretto was based on Euripides's *Iphigenia in Tauris*. Although more contemporary versions of the myth were available, the librettist Guillard chose the original Euripides version and veered away from eighteenth-century audience expectations of subplots and love interests. Instead, *Iphigénie en Tauride* became one of the first operas to focus on the friendship and love of siblings.<sup>122</sup>

Euripides's version of this myth, with only four main characters, was the right medium for Gluck to highlight his reforms in plot simplification. In order to implement the reforms, as well as to capture the nobility and heroism of Iphigenia in the music, Gluck opted for simple lyrical melodies indicative of Lully's influence, rather than the florid passagework of *opera seria*. Gluck's music evoked refinement and simplicity suggestive of the beauty of classicism. By simplifying the melodies, Gluck was able to focus on orchestration and creating drama through the "voice" of the orchestra. Gluck purposefully selected instruments for each character and emotion. Although this practice set him apart from Handel's typical use of oboe and strings, Gluck adopted Handel's orchestration with horns.

Handel's experimental use of horns was particularly remarkable; for instance, in *Giulio Cesare*, Handel composed "for four horns pitched in

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<sup>122</sup> Ewans, "Iphigénie en Tauride and Elektra," 232-233; Daniel Heartz, *Music in European Capitals: The Galant Style 1720-1780* (New York: W.W. Norton 2003), 827.

[tonic and dominant] keys” which was not used until the era of the symphony in the late 1700s and early 1800s with Beethoven’s orchestration.<sup>123</sup> Horns in opera scores were “not found before the Royal Academy period.”<sup>124</sup> Handel’s new use of horns, incorporating them into 31 out of 39 of his operas added insight into characters and increased a new color to the Baroque opera palette. Further, by using horns in key spots, he added continuity to the score.<sup>125</sup>

Likewise in the score of *Iphigénie en Tauride*, Gluck found horns to be useful tools for evoking gender roles and character. Here, horns seemed to signify male gender and heroic virtue and were most notably associated with the Orestes’s (Oreste’s) and Thoas’s music.<sup>126</sup> When fate or destiny was mentioned, when Iphigenia struggled against “la rigueur de [son] sort” (the rigor of [her] fate), or when Orestes was mentioned by name, horns were usually present.<sup>127</sup>

Similarly, Iphigenia’s gender and virtue were clearly depicted by instrumentation. Through the history of opera, composers frequently chose instruments to evoke some sort of pathos or to symbolize a character’s emotional state or thoughts. Specifically, the flute and oboe were often chosen to show some sort of grace or virtue, and in some

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<sup>123</sup> Winton Dean, “Handel’s *Giulio Cesare*,” *Musical Times* 104 (1963): 403; Dean, *Handel and the Opera Seria*, 191.

<sup>124</sup> Dean, *Handel and the Opera Seria*, 191.

<sup>125</sup> Dean, *Handel and the Opera Seria*, 191.

<sup>126</sup> Howard, *Gluck and the Birth of Modern Opera*, 33, 52, 69, 90, 96. A discussion of Gluck’s use of symmetry and form is not within the confines of this paper.

<sup>127</sup> Alfred Einstein, *Gluck*, translated by Eric Blom (London: J.M. Dent & Sons 1954), 162-164.

instances signified a person's mind or sanity, as was the case in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) and Verdi's *Nabucco* (1842). In *Iphigénie en Tauride*, Gluck used the flute and oboe to depict female virtue and emotional lamentation, a practice he may have picked up from Handel. For instance in Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, the aria "Priva son d'ogni conforto" (When all is devoid of comfort) was accompanied by flute because it was the traditional instrument for mourning in Baroque opera.<sup>128</sup> Gluck used the flute, oboe, and clarinet to signify female gender and virtue. Horns accompanied men and the oboe accompanied Iphigenia. When Iphigenia was in prayer or when Iphigenia took on the male role of interrogator, the sustained oboe was present above her as if to remind her and the audience of her female virtue and sanctified position as High Priestess.

Gluck's use of the oboe was somewhat different than Handel's. Handel frequently used the oboe as a matter of habit to accompany amorous, plaintive and sorrowful arias for all his heroic characters, male and female alike.<sup>129</sup> Although one may find the trend interesting, there is no pattern to suggest that Handel purposefully used the oboe as an instrument to evoke virtue. Gluck on the other hand, used the oboe when Iphigenia was in prayer and speaking to Artemis. Gluck's intention behind his instrumentation was especially revealed when he paired the oboe with the goddess Artemis, figuratively the most virtuous of all characters in the

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<sup>128</sup> Dean and Knapp, *Handel's Operas*, 497.

<sup>129</sup> Stahura, "Handel and the Orchestra," 246.

opera in that she is a goddess. When Artemis appeared at the end of the opera, she did not have an obbligato oboe like that of Iphigenia. Instead, several oboes appeared in thirds, fourths, and fifths, in consonant harmonies and in lyrical sweeping melodies. Similar orchestration occurred in Iphigenia's aria "Sento nell'alma" from Handel's *Oreste* where the oboes acted in concert with Iphigenia; however, they were not as melodic and doubled the violins. Handel's use of oboes seemed to be used for timbre rather than to highlight Iphigenia's virtuous nature.

The most definitive example of gender delineation and virtue in *Iphigénie en Tauride* occurred in the final confrontation between Iphigenia and Thoas. Flutes underscored Iphigenia's music while Thoas was accompanied by horns. The contradiction of virtue and lack of virtue in Iphigenia's music added to the sense of heroism and overall drama.

### **Characterization**

As the heroine of Gluck's opera, Iphigenia is different from either of her sisters in that she is both the ideal when it comes to honor and the exception when it comes to her societal role, thus placing her status above both of her sisters and mirroring the important position of the first born child in antiquity. At the beginning of the opera, Iphigenia is mostly depicted as a virtuous, obedient female, operating within the confines of the temple inside the *thalamos*. She is immediately confronted with her

family's curse and her own internal struggle about her family's fate.

Consequently, Iphigenia, in spite of her virtuous actions and noble birth, is likewise cursed and is not virtuous in the eyes of the Greeks.

Iphigenia's virtue was further blemished by her work sacrificing humans at the behest of the goddess Artemis.<sup>130</sup> In Euripides's *Iphigenia in Tauris*, a man and not Iphigenia enacted the sacrifice.<sup>131</sup> Gluck nonetheless found that human sacrifice committed by a woman was a fantastic opportunity for dramatic impact.<sup>132</sup> At this time in history, during "The Enlightenment," Europe was exploring new philosophical and theological possibilities (some of them spearheaded by the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant). Although these philosophies seemed progressive for the time, Gluck still had to temper his interpretation to his audience's more mainstream sensibilities. The thought of human sacrifice committed by a woman, coupled with ancient Greek apathy toward the act of sacrifice, was repulsive to eighteenth-century audiences. Therefore, Gluck painted Iphigenia in a Christian light: remorseful, pious, and struggling against her duty and internal human emotions.<sup>133</sup> In doing so, Gluck gave Iphigenia a 'virtuous female' emotional-but-obedient side, while endowing her with a man's responsibility to honor and duty. Since

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<sup>130</sup> Robert R. Heitner, "The Iphigenia in Tauris Theme in Drama of the Eighteenth Century" *Comparative Literature* 16, no. 4 (Autumn 1964): 292-293, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/stable/1769613>.

<sup>131</sup> Robin Osborne, "Women and Sacrifice in Classical Greece," *Classical Quarterly* 43 (1993): 405, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/stable/639178>.

<sup>132</sup> Ewans, "*Iphigénie en Tauride* and *Elektra*," 236-237.

<sup>133</sup> Ewans, "*Iphigénie en Tauride* and *Elektra*," 233-234.

she adheres to heroic male virtues, she is, in accordance with ancient Greek models of a woman, perceived as unvirtuous. Therein lies the contradiction: virtuous and unvirtuous at the same time.

Gluck's characters are passionate yet fragile and above all insightful. Throughout *Iphigénie en Tauride*, Iphigenia's contradiction with virtue, as well as male and female personas, is emphasized not only through Gluck's symmetry of form coupled with lyrical and plaintive melodies, but with the instrumentation chosen to accompany her.<sup>134</sup> In *Iphigénie en Tauride*, the depiction of gender and virtue is important to analyze because it serves as the pinnacle of Gluck's reform opera and the crossroads of two viewpoints in opera, the French and Italian aesthetic. Orchestration in the late eighteenth century became a viable carrier for character development, virtue, and drama, and the libretto served the composer as a vehicle for drama.

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<sup>134</sup> Howard, *Gluck and the Birth of Modern Opera*, 33, 52, 69, 90, 96.



## Chapter 5

### *ELEKTRA* (1909)

#### **Richard Strauss and Late Nineteenth-Century Philosophy**

*Elektra* is a rich example of Richard Strauss's compositional techniques. He employs late romantic and modern techniques such as chromaticism, a shift from traditional harmony to atonality, new innovations in orchestral colors, and a philosophical and emotional bent on musical drama to portray the obsessive maniacal nature of Electra's character. Musicologists consider *Elektra* to be one of Strauss's greatest compositions. Strauss pulled compositional techniques from many German composers from different eras and they influenced his fondness for integrating the essence of a character and the drama of the plot into a tapestry of musical imagery and emotion.

Richard Wagner was one of the composers from which Strauss drew his inspiration for *Elektra*, having revered Wagner's compositions for most of his life. Strauss differed from Wagner in that he was more concerned with the emotional sensationalism of opera than compositional techniques, as evidenced by his comment about Wagner that, "the brain that composed *Tristan und Isolde* was surely as cool as marble," and as Cambridge musicologist Bryan Gillam argues, "it is a statement that says far more about Strauss than Wagner in its emphasis on technique over

emotion.”<sup>135</sup> Despite this criticism of Wagner, Strauss incorporated Wagner’s use of leitmotifs, chromaticism, and innovative orchestration. For example, in *Elektra*, Strauss blocked the orchestra into choirs for a greater range of color, sonority, and blend by also dividing the string sections, just as Wagner had done in his previous compositions like *Lohengrin* (1850).<sup>136</sup> The massive number of instruments required for these choirs, the dense harmonies, and the volume of sound emitted from them depict the epic nature of Electra’s character, the heroic grandeur of the fallen House of Atreus, and the larger-than-life emotional impact she has on the audience. Strauss adopted this technique from his study of other composer’s works.

Strauss’s musical education was supervised by his father, Franz, who was the principal horn player in the Munich Court Orchestra. His father ensured that Strauss was influenced by the compositions of Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Franz Schubert. However engrained his musical foundations were in classical composition, Strauss admired Wagner's and Johannes Brahms's innovative compositional styles, despite his father’s apparent dislike of both these composers. During Strauss’s conducting career, he conducted numerous Mozart operas and also conducted his own Symphony in F

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<sup>135</sup> Bryan Gillam, *The Life of Richard Strauss* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1.

<sup>136</sup> Richard Strauss, *Elektra: Tragedy in One Act*, Op. 58, libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Republication of original publication by Adolph Fürstner in Berlin, 1916 (Minneola, NY: Dover, 1990), 4; Leon Plantinga, *Romantic Music: A History of Musical Style in Nineteenth-century Europe* (New York; London: W.W. Norton 1984), 448-449.

minor for Brahms. In response to hearing Strauss's symphony, Brahms said, "Your symphony contains too much playing about with themes...differ[ing] from one another only in rhythm."<sup>137</sup>

Strauss, however, continued to use Wagnerian motives like the "Agamemnon motive" in *Elektra*, but he used them dramatically, selectively, and pointedly rather than using an abundance of motives as a dominating compositional feature like Wagner did in his operas. Strauss used Wagnerian-like motives to enhance the essence of his characters' virtue and personality and to communicate the emotion of the drama without words. For instance, at the end of *Elektra*, Strauss composed the denouement as an exaggerated waltz of elation which transformed into the terror of the Agamemnon motive. The blaring motive climaxed in major key and served as an anchor of dramatic relief. This relief and transition of the motive to a major key created a visceral reaction and illustrated the horror of condemnation in the motive's first use and its deliberate use as an emotional release and resolution during its final occurrence.

Mozart's influence on Strauss was also apparent in *Elektra*. Having studied *Don Giovanni* and conducted the opera, Strauss used similar orchestration and instruments for the terror-stricken Electra (Elektra) invoking her father's spirit, as Mozart did during the arrival of Commendatore at the end of the opera. The scene from *Don Giovanni* was entrenched in chromaticism with an ascending line by half steps. The

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<sup>137</sup> Bryan Gillam, *Richard Strauss's Elektra*, (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1991), 207-207.

Commendatore's voice was written with an almost ostinato-like recitation accompanied by flames seemingly flickering in the strings and a chorus chanting with thundering brass and Don Giovanni's wails over the top of the orchestra. The similarity of Mozart's composition compared with Strauss's use of brass (especially the trombones), the texture of the orchestra, the wailing of Electra, and his use of the Agamemnon motive in *Elektra* was more than coincidental. According to musicologist Jan Smaczny, "Mozart's style was a constant point of reference for Strauss."<sup>138</sup>

In addition classical composers and the works of Brahms and Wagner influencing Strauss, he was interested in the philosophical works of contemporary philosophers and psychologists of his time. Strauss's operas were about love, death, and redemption and his interest in subconscious philosophies, dreams, and consciousness permeated these themes. Like his opera *Salome* (1905), *Elektra* explored late nineteenth-century contemporary issues concerning women's place in society and infused them with commentary based on the musings of Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Otto Weininger.<sup>139</sup> Weininger wrote *Sex and Character* in 1903, espousing the then contemporary belief that women were materialistic, animalistic, sexual beings who act upon

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<sup>138</sup> Gillam, *The Life of Richard Strauss*, 15, 35, 56, 88-89, 113; Jan Smaczny, "Mozart and the Twentieth Century," in *The Cambridge Companion to Mozart*, edited by Simon P. Keefe (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 195.

<sup>139</sup> Plantinga, *Romantic Music*, 449-451; Lawrence Kramer, "Fin-de-Siècle Fantasies: *Elektra* and the Culture of Supremacism," in *Opera and Modern Culture: Wagner and Strauss* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 2004), 190-193; Ewans, "*Iphigénie en Tauride* and *Elektra*," 238-239.

instincts alone rather than intellect and reason.<sup>140</sup> In light of these "new" philosophies, Strauss explored these issues in both *Salome* and *Elektra*. These operas dealt with women of antiquity who exhibited an excessive lack of virtue. In Hofmannsthal's libretto for *Elektra*, Weininger's depiction of women was coupled with Freud's interpretation of the condition of *hysteria*.<sup>141</sup> The subject of Electra's perpetual mourning was an easy target with which to exploit these issues.

### **Strauss's Greek Tragedy**

In his youth, Strauss studied classics, drama, aesthetics, philosophy, and art history at the University of Munich.<sup>142</sup> Classical subjects had an allure that influenced his compositions and writings for the remainder of his life. Strauss's orchestral and choral music based on classical subjects include *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1896), *Ein Heldenleben* (1899), *Olympische Hymne* (1934), and *Metamorphosen* (1945). Of his 15 operas, 40 percent were infused with Greek myth, including *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1916), *Die ägyptische Helena* (1928), *Daphne* (1937), *Die Liebe der Danae* (1952), and *Capriccio* (1942).

In spite of censorship and bans on the work due to subject matter, Strauss premiered his opera *Salome* in 1905. Audiences and contemporary

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<sup>140</sup> Kramer, "Elektra and the Culture of Supremacism," 199.

<sup>141</sup> Ewans, "Iphigénie en Tauride and Elektra," 240; Lorna Martens, "The Theme of the Repressed Memory in Hofmannsthal's Elektra," *The German Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (Winter 1987): 39-41, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/stable/407157>. Eighteenth-century theory of *hysteria* is a proposed psychological condition in which women exhibit unmanageable unrestrained emotional behavior caused by some sort of past trauma; *Hysteria* referred to a medical condition thought to be particular to women and caused by disturbances of the uterus (from the Greek ὕστέρα "hysterā" = uterus).

<sup>142</sup> Gillam, *The Life of Richard Strauss*, 18-19.

composers were riveted and taken in by this new opera. On the heels of his success with *Salome*, he looked for another topic from antiquity with similar emotionalism on which to compose another opera of this magnitude. After watching Hofmannsthal's play, Strauss asked him to write the libretto for *Elektra*. Hofmannsthal accepted the challenge and wrote the libretto in collaboration with Strauss. *Elektra* premiered at the Dresden Royal Opera House in January, 1909. In addition to imbuing this Greek drama with the philosophies of Freud and Nietzsche, Hofmannsthal simplified the plot of Sophocles's *Electra* and pared down the number of characters just as Guillard did with Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride*.<sup>143</sup>

For the heroines of his opera Strauss selected two opposites: Chrysothemis, a virtuous female espousing the Athenian domestic ideal of complacency and dreams of having a family; and Electra, the unvirtuous female. The framework of *Elektra* casts its atypical "heroine" out from her home and into the unfamiliar sphere of the *polis*. As such, she was associated with a complete absence of the *oikos*, therefore symbolically cast out of the family. For the entire opera, she dwells outside the palace in the sphere of the *polis*, the realm of men, making her unvirtuous symbolically. In Sophocles's *Electra*, Electra complained about her state of existence, when she exhorted,

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<sup>143</sup> Ewans, "*Iphigénie en Tauride* and *Elektra*," 238-239, 242.

“half my life is wasted away  
in hopeless waiting; all my strength is gone.  
I have no husband at my side  
to fight for me, I have borne no children.  
I am only an alien slave.”<sup>144</sup>

She was not only mourning for her father, but for her owned damned existence as it related to the Greek ideal. Her fixed state of lamentation precluded marriage or any other life. Her mind was dogged with two thoughts alone: the memory of Agamemnon and the anticipation of Clytaemnestra's (Klytämnestra's) death. She complained, “like a dishonored stranger, I administer the chambers of my father's *thalamos*.<sup>145</sup>” Electra used the term *thalamos* as a sort of triple entendre. *Thalamos* referred to her father's tomb, her parental home, and a marriage contract. In the myth, Electra was enclosed in a shroud of mourning and was physically in her father's tomb which symbolically became her parental home, which she lived in and administered to like a wife. This complaint illustrated Electra's lament that instead of her inclusion into the *thalamos* of a wedding contract and thereby a virtuous life, she was plagued by a *thalamos* of a darker nature; Agamemnon's burial tomb, where she was draped in sorrow and filled with a bloodthirsty desire for vengeance. Thus, Electra, rather than doting on a husband perpetually doted on Agamemnon's tomb. The association of the sepulchral, bridal, and parental *thalamos* was unspoken, yet directly

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<sup>144</sup> Sophocles, *Electra and Other Plays*, translated by E.F. Watling (London, UK: Penguin Books, Ltd.), 74, *Electra*, lines 181-185.

<sup>145</sup> Seaford, “The Imprisonment of Women in Greek Tragedy,” 78.

implied. The implied internment in a tomb of utter darkness threatened Electra and it was only appropriate she met this threat and condemnation of seclusion with maniacal bitterness.<sup>146</sup>

According to Richard Seaford, “confinement of the female is a theme favored by tragedy,” because most dramatic action occurs between the hidden sphere of the *thalamos* and the outside world of the *polis*.<sup>147</sup> These themes were exploited in this state of “limbo.” Electra was forced to adapt and work within this arena, almost as though she was in partnership with it, embracing her incarceration with bitter voracity. Electra cried,

“I am beside myself,  
I know. Terrors too strong  
Have driven me down. And now  
This passion can have no end  
Till my life ends.”<sup>148</sup>

Set on the destruction of the murderous Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus (Aegisth), Electra was forced into taking on male characteristics to the point where the male identity consumed her. The male identity gave her the means with which she could exact revenge.

The polarity between the spheres of existence was great in antiquity and seclusion from the “normal” sphere of existence was equally disheartening for both men and women. As evidenced above, Electra was driven to vengeful tirades. When Orestes (Orest) ordered Aegisthus into the house to take his life, it was the place of the act that consumed his

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<sup>146</sup> Seaford, “The Imprisonment of Women in Greek Tragedy,” 78-80.

<sup>147</sup> Seaford, “The Imprisonment of Women in Greek Tragedy,” 89-90.

<sup>148</sup> Sophocles, *Electra*, 75, lines 223-227.



thoughts, and not the fact that his life would end. Aegisthus pleaded, “Why must I go in there? Must this good deed be hidden from the daylight?”<sup>149</sup>

In Sophocles’s version, Orestes freed Electra from her suffering by killing Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus. The Greek Chorus stated, “Now for the House of Atreus freedom is won from all her suffering, and this day’s work well done,” and then the tragedy concludes.<sup>150</sup> Yet, in Strauss’s and Hoffmannsthal’s version, Electra’s male approach to justice overpowered her. All that was female inside her ceased to exist and she ultimately died at the end of the opera in spite of Orestes’s avenging Agamemnon. This change significantly altered the Atreus myth.

In Sophocles’s and Euripides’s versions, Electra’s virtue was reinstated at the end of the drama as she married Pylades and had children, thus vindicating her virtue and forgiving all malevolence and shortcomings of her previous behavior. In Strauss and Hoffmannstahl’s version, her sins were unforgiveable, and she was condemned to die. The dance and resolution at the end of Strauss’s opera not only made a statement about Electra’s unvirtuous behavior, but lent itself to a much more intensely dramatic finale. Strauss’s selection of the revised version of the drama was not surprising considering his interests in modern philosophy and the aspects of Electra’s role which made it a perfect vessel from which to explore and display contemporary philosophies. Further, in

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<sup>149</sup> Sophocles, *Electra*, 116, lines 1498-1499.

<sup>150</sup> Sophocles, *Electra*, 117, lines 1507-1510.

light of the trend of neo-Romanticism that pervaded German theatres at this time, it was a sublime text from which to exaggerate the more symbolic aspects of Greek culture.

### **Orchestration, Motives, and Chords**

Due to *Elektra's* vast emotional content, the opera employs what is arguably the largest orchestra in opera history. The epic scale of the orchestra, exactly 115 musicians as annotated in the score, consists of an unusual amount of brass and winds, as well as the three separate string sections mentioned earlier.<sup>151</sup> The orchestra is one of the many tools Strauss wielded to embody Chrysothemis and Electra.

Like Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride*, instruments are paired with characters and virtues in Strauss's *Elektra*. Male virtue is represented by brass, usually horns, and female virtue by reed instruments (oboes, heckelphones, clarinets), and in Electra's case, the flute. In the first scene of the opera, Electra first appears with a flute, which serves as the last remnant of Electra's "femininity" and virtue, and on her first word, "Allein" (Alone), she is joined by the heckelphone, English horns, and clarinets. Flutes also represent Electra's mind: they emulate her thoughts and serve as a translator to the audience about what she is thinking. When Chrysothemis brings up Electra's "sleepless, unruly mind," the flute twitters away over these words. Likewise, Chrysothemis cries, "Schwester!...Elektra hilf uns!" (Sister!...Electra help us!) the flute answers

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<sup>151</sup> Richard Strauss, *Elektra: Tragedy in One Act*, Op. 58, libretto by Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Republication of original publication by Adolph Fürstner in Berlin, 1916 (Minneola, NY: Dover, 1990), 4; Plantinga, *Romantic Music*, 448-449.

as Electra sings a reply. Further, when Electra converses with Clytaemnestra the flute intermittently responds with laughing figures when Clytaemnestra is at her most distraught.

It is interesting to note that Electra is frequently paired with the heckelphone, which is a double-reed instrument that Wagner had requested be invented in order to fulfill the baritone voice of the double-reed choir in his orchestra. Wagner did not see this instrument used in his lifetime, however, it was finally introduced in orchestras in 1904. Strauss used the heckelphone in *Salome*; he was the first composer to use it as a solo instrument. He also used it in his score for *Elektra*, perhaps to depict the ugliness of her character, the biting tone of her words, and the unheroic quality of her character, as the heckelphone produces a loud shawm-like sound.<sup>152</sup>

One of the most intriguing scenes is Electra's seduction of Chrysothemis to convince her to help murder Clytaemnestra. In this scene, both sisters' vocal lines are accompanied with each character's typical instrumentation; however, horns also accompany Electra's vocal line evoking Electra's now male role. In ancient Greek society, seduction was one of the worst crimes one could commit. When compared to the crime of rape, seduction was considered to be the ghastlier crime.<sup>153</sup> Electra

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<sup>152</sup> Philip Bate and Michael Finkelman, "Heckelphone," *Grove Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed 9 November 2012, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/12655>. A shawm was a double-reed instrument used from the Twelfth Century until the Seventeenth Century C.E. It sounds loud, powerful and buzzes similar to a trumpet blast.

<sup>153</sup> Edward M. Harris, "Did Athenians Regard Seduction as a Worse Crime than Rape?"

commits one of the most despicable crimes in Ancient Greece; yet, because of the inferred heroic character of the brass in Strauss's orchestration, she takes on male heroic qualities and virtues; the virtues of domination over ones enemies, power gain, and advantage through intellect. Further, in accordance with the late eighteenth-century philosophies of Nietzsche, men are more heroic and virtuous than women. The orchestration combined with this underlying philosophy help define Electra as the antagonistic male figure in this scene, with a heroic quality in spite of the vileness of her actions. Also, Electra musically twists Chrysothemis's female virtue against her: Electra's music and phrasing mimic Chrysothemis's lyrical sweeping melodies and Electra's music has Chrysothemis's instrumentation.<sup>154</sup> Electra's male-like domination over the pure virtuous female invites the audience to speculate on virtue and gender roles.

At the end of the opera, Electra's virtue and the instrumental characterization of her female identity are drowned out by the Agamemnon motive which permeates the orchestra. The explosion of

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*Classical Quarterly* 40, no. 20 (1990): 370-372, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/stable/639097>. This probably had something to do with the importance of knowing where a household's offspring was coming from. With rape, a man would know that the offspring was not his. In the case of seduction, uncertainty was present.

<sup>154</sup> Lawrence Kramer, " *Elektra* and the Culture of Supremacism," 193-194, 218. This is also a similar technique W.A. Mozart used in the duet between Giovanni and Elvira in *Don Giovanni*.

brass and the visceral cry of Electra invoking her father's spirit  
 "Agamemnon!" mark her death and crush any remaining female Greek  
 virtue and identity.<sup>155</sup>

Strauss, like his predecessor Wagner, uses leitmotifs to depict the  
 various characters.<sup>156</sup> The most prevalent leitmotif used is the one  
 associated with Agamemnon, an outline of a minor triad (Figure 1).<sup>157</sup>



Figure 1

Electra obsessively sings the Agamemnon motive, which exhibits the male  
 heroic virtue of a king through its marcato rhythmic figure and  
 orchestration. Due to her obsessive use of the motive, it is associated with  
 Electra and becomes yet another way her virtue is symbolically mutated.



Figure 2

In addition to the motive, the "Elektra Chord" is another musical  
 depiction that enhances the opera (Figure 2). This chord is a polychord  
 encompassing two sonorities simultaneously: E major and C# major, with

<sup>155</sup> Kramer, "Elektra and the Culture of Supremacism," 203-204.

<sup>156</sup> Christopher Wintle, "Elektra and the 'Elektra Complex'," in *Opera Guide 37: Salome/Elektra by Richard Strauss*, edited by Nicholas John (London: J. Calder; New York, Riverrun Press 1988), 77-79.

<sup>157</sup> Wintle, "Elektra and the 'Elektra Complex'," 79-80; Ewans, "Iphigénie en Tauride and Elektra," 243.



*Figure 3*

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## Characterization

Just as in Gluck's opera, the heroine appears her most virtuous at the beginning of the opera when she mourns for Agamemnon. Electra is utterly virtue-less unless she evokes male traits. When she does exhibit virtues they are male Greek virtues: honor, cleverness, scheming and manipulation of others to obtain victory over foes. Whatever honor these virtues may have bestowed upon her, her self-absorption, sadism, rage, predatory seduction of her sister, and her lies destroy any possible nobility.<sup>159</sup> These male virtues and defects are etched into Strauss's score and, according to Lawrence Kramer, "Strauss's *Elektra* made vocal shrillness and orchestral mayhem, virtually the norm."<sup>160</sup>

In addition to Strauss's choice of instrumentation, the Agamemnon motive, and the "Elektra Chord," Strauss sets Electra's passion, speech patterns, and vocal line in a manner that reflects Sophocles's original text. According to Thomas Marion Woodard, "Electra dominates excessively... her speaking part is one of the longest in Greek tragedy, she remains in full view nine-tenths of the time; she includes the heights and depths of emotion in her range, she chants more lyrics than any other Sophoclean protagonist."<sup>161</sup>

As dramatic evidence of Strauss's interpretation of what a "heroine" is, Electra's vocal range is a manifestation of her emotional range and

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<sup>159</sup> Thomas Marion Woodard, "The Electra of Sophocles," in *Sophocles: A Collection of Critical Essays*, compiled and edited by Thomas Marion Woodard (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 130-131.

<sup>160</sup> Kramer, "*Elektra* and the Culture of Supremacism," 191.

<sup>161</sup> Woodard, "The Electra of Sophocles," 125-126.

adaptability to different situations. Electra's declamatory vocal line is chromatic with excessive leaps. Her harsh words have a vulgar tone, which in turn forfeits the audience's sympathy towards her. Electra is "a virtuoso of styles and voices, she croons, howls, exults, mourns, teases, muses, admonishes, and scourges with a volatility that matches the orchestra's obsessional tone-painting and onomatopoeia."<sup>162</sup> Although her vocal line exaggerates her defects, hate and manipulation, these defects contribute to her power over the audience in a heroic and masculine way. As a whole, Strauss ennobles what is masculine and mocks what is feminine.<sup>163</sup> Aggrandizing male heroic nobility is perhaps one reason why Chrysothemis is set as a stark contrast to her sister Electra.

Electra and Chrysothemis are opposites in all things concerning characterization: from their music and emotions to their outlook on future prospects and their interplay between family members. For instance, there is a disparity between the simplest viewpoints concerning the gods' intentions for them. In the libretto, Electra claims "the gods go through us like the blade of a sword," meaning the gods have no sympathy for the Atreides and are cold vicious entities lacking moral conscience. In contrast, Chrysothemis claims, "all goodness has been promised from the gods," meaning that the gods only care for the women's well-being and happiness.

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<sup>162</sup> Kramer, "*Elektra* and the Culture of Supremacism," 198.

<sup>163</sup> Ewans, "*Iphigénie en Tauride* and *Elektra*," 245-246.



The juxtaposition of character is reflected in the style of each woman's text as well as the instruments chosen to accompany her.<sup>164</sup> The instruments chosen for Chrysothemis are strings, English horn, heckelphone and the clarinet. She has primarily diatonic sweeping melodies which are a sharp contrast to Electra's extravagant leaps and speech-like chromatic lines.

Chrysothemis's power comes from her emulation of the Greek ideal. She is the most "virtuous" based on Athenian virtue and her desires are what a woman "should" wish for: family, marriage, children, and a wish to remain inside the *thalamos* in seclusion. Chrysothemis is the weakest of the sisters, the last-born child. She is powerful only in her desire to emulate the Greek ideal and unlike Electra, her music is anchored in tonal language with soaring legato melodies and lyrical text. In a more traditional sense of musical language, she is more "old-fashioned" and is only deprived of virtue because she is exiled outside the *oikos* because of Aegisthus's and Clytaemnestra's fear of retribution from offspring. Chrysothemis represents what is solely female in the opera, yet Electra and the voice of the orchestra often sound as if they are poking fun or mocking Chrysothemis's feminine nature.<sup>165</sup>

What is universal for Electra and Chrysothemis, in antiquity as well as in modern times, is that both fail to meet cultural expectations for acceptable female behavior: Electra is overpowering and unvirtuous, while

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<sup>164</sup> Strauss, *Elektra*.

<sup>165</sup> Kramer, "Elektra and the Culture of Supremacism," 194-196. According to Kramer, Chrysothemis was "the supremacist cover girl."

Chrysothemis is weak, simpering and tainted by exclusion. For the Greeks, Chrysothemis strived for the Athenian ideal, but fell short due to her being cast-out of the *thalamos*. Electra rarely behaved in manner consistent with a virtuous woman. When Electra displayed heroic Greek virtues, it was usually only a result of her displaying behaviors acceptable in accordance with designated male gender roles. Thus, her heroic male virtues and lack of female virtues ultimately would have condemned her in antiquity. Her behavior included one of the worst types of crimes in antiquity: a crime against the family unit, the *oikos*, and in turn, a crime against the city-state.

Sophocles's foundational drama, adapted by Hofmannstahl's libretto, and interpreted by Strauss's music, evolved into a captivating and complex rendering of the human spirit. Strauss incorporated classical musical constructs, Wagnerian motives and orchestration with contemporary philosophies to formulate his *Elektra*. His astonishing sense of musical terror, woven into a dense texture of blaring horns, complex chords, and chromaticism, were all bound by the isolation, tension, and release of Electra's emotional outpouring. Electra's and Chrysothemis's virtues were blemished and both women depicted the worst extremes of female behavior. The heroic depiction and exploration of the feminine and the masculine in the orchestration and vocal lines were an exaggerated, visceral, yet poignant portrayal of the Atreides myth.

## Chapter 6

### SUMMARY

#### **Historical Receptions of Myth**

Even though belief in the ancient Greek gods has dissipated since antiquity, mythological characters have survived in literature and drama, are often used as allegorical figures, and even remain in the heavens being associated with the constellations. Prior to their use in the opera houses, myths were an integral part of culture, religion, and education. For over three thousand years, myths have been taught in schools and communicated throughout various art forms.

From the Middle Ages through the Renaissance and from *opera seria* to twentieth-century chamber opera, myths have been popular sources for inspiration. The function of Greek myths in the twenty-first century is almost unchanged since its origins; and these myths remain a vehicle for entertainment, self-awareness, and catharsis. One need not look far for evidence of heroic characters in popular culture, as they are ever present in television, plays, musicals and movies.

Other than the obvious mythologically titled shows, myths are present in movies like *His Girl Friday*, *Greystoke* (Tarzan), *Dune*, *Star Wars*, *O Brother - Where Art Thou?*, *Stand By Me*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Frosty the Snowman*, *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars* and most recently *The Hunger Games*. In television, they appear in shows like *Battlestar Galactica*, *Magnum P.I.*, *Star Trek*, *Stargate*, *Buffy the*

*Vampire Slayer*, and *Supernatural*. Musicals like *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, *The Boys from Syracuse*, *My Fair Lady*, and *The Lion King* are also based on Greek myths. Countless plays and popular songs, including satirical works by P.D.Q. Bach such as *Iphigenia in Brooklyn* and *Oedipus Tex*, are written about myths. In the era of modern technology, Greek myth permeates the computer gaming world in games like *World of Warcraft* and *God of War*. As evidenced, there does not appear to an end to the appeal and frequent use of Greek myth in art and popular Western culture (see Appendix B).<sup>166</sup>

As opera is a multi-disciplined art form where the target audience and the purpose of opera has changed, the function of myth, as well as the handling of the myths, have been altered to meet the needs of the society and the times for which they were composed. These alterations are necessary in order to assure the audience's positive reception of the story and to serve the purpose and function of opera within society. Consequently, composers were less concerned with emulating the ideal Greek woman and more concerned with the societal reception and characterization of the female persona onstage.

Composers and librettists of opera altered various mythological elements including text, plot, characters and character associations, as well as some of the more production-oriented facets of an opera like costumes, sets, musical style, form, instrumentation, and the length of the

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<sup>166</sup> Morford, *Classical Mythology*, 715-756.

work. A society's political and religious viewpoints were usually taken into consideration, especially from the early Baroque into the Romantic Eras. Religion and a society's accepted belief system were primary factors in driving these responses and alterations to the plot and text. An example of this can be derived from Handel's *Hercules*. Although the genre musical drama was a staged drama or what one might consider secular oratorio, it followed the same conventions and purpose of most of Handel's *opera seria* compositions.<sup>167</sup> English librettist Reverend Thomas Broughton adapted the myth which was based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Virgil's *Aeneid* (Book VI), Seneca's *Hercules Furens* (*The Madness of Hercules*), and Sophocles's *Trachiniae* (*The Women of Trachis*).<sup>168</sup> In the libretto, the choice of words for Dejanira's "mad" aria "Where Shall I Fly?" reflected the adherence to social belief. The issue with the original myth was the furies, or Erinyes. Since Dejanira killed her husband, the Furies were called to torment her and because of the sensitivity of the eighteenth-century Christian audiences to heathen beliefs - especially considering England's tragic history with religious conflict - the literal portrayal of these mythical creatures was offensive. Broughton and Handel opted to paint them as "real" beings or characters in the recitative to keep the

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<sup>167</sup> Anthony Hicks, "Handel and the idea of an oratorio," in *The Cambridge companion to Handel*, edited by Donald Burrows (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 159-160; Todd S. Gilman, "Handel's *Hercules* and Its Semiosis," *The Musical Quarterly* 81, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997), 449-481, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/742326>.

<sup>168</sup> Ruth Smith, "Handel's English librettists," in *The Cambridge companion to Handel*, edited by Donald Burrows (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 100-103.

"authenticity" of the myth; however, they added the words "of the mind" in the aria to show that the furies were merely figments of the imagination.

Another example of alteration to appease audiences was Handel's plot change to replace Dejanira's suicide with a "mad" scene.<sup>169</sup> In early Christian society through the early eighteenth century, suicide was an immoral act of cowardice which sentenced the soul to eternal damnation. By removing this type of immorality, Handel actually made Dejanira more noble and virtuous. Contrary to Christian beliefs, suicide was a magnanimous act in antiquity because "the early Greeks considered suicide an appropriate solution to many stressful situations such as dishonor or disappointment in love."<sup>170</sup>

Historically and in contemporary society, religious and social factors are just some of the issues composers face when drawing upon myths to compose operas. Despite these numerous issues, many audiences are drawn to these stories and the operas are positively received. Perhaps this is because Greek myths are inextricably woven into the very fabric of western culture. The heroism of the human spirit in conflict and tragedy draws us back to the Greek dramas. The characters are honest, merciless and absolute, and they behave in the most noble and truthful manner when struck down by the calamities of life. No matter what our divergent

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<sup>169</sup> David Ross Hurley, "Dejanira and the Physicians: Aspects of Hysteria in Handel's *Hercules*," *The Musical Quarterly* 80, No. 3 (Autumn, 1996), 548-561, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/742306>.

<sup>170</sup> James C. Coleman, *Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life*, Fifth Ed. (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1976), 603.

cultural beliefs may be, the universal characters of tragedy are an inspiration for understanding the human condition and emerging self-awareness.

Aristotle said “tragedy generates pity and fear to bring about the catharsis of these emotions.”<sup>171</sup> This catharsis allows audiences to vicariously face some of the worst events and emotions in life, offers some form of resolution, and provides opportunity for understanding and compassion. Not only do the characters and plots of Greek tragedy bring about a catharsis, but the roles in Sophocles and especially Euripides challenge the gods and superstition, and enable us to question the meaning of life, death, and the powers of the universe.

The ancient Greek dramatists sought to have their dramas enrich the city-state and serve as a moral compass by which to assess oneself in order to better oneself. The tragic plays were most frequently focused on the tragic male hero who tries to reclaim his throne. The Greek dramatists scrutinized heroic male and female virtue and juxtaposed them against each other. *Oreste*, *Iphigénie en Tauride*, and *Elektra* adhere to this model yet, *Oreste* is the only one that maintains the focus on the male role.<sup>172</sup> Both *Iphigénie en Tauride* and *Elektra* focus almost entirely on the daughters of Agamemnon, although the action is male driven. There is an undeniable shift in focus from male gender roles to female; however, the

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<sup>171</sup> Felicity Rosslyn, *Tragic Plots: A New Reading from Aeschylus to Lorca*, from *Studies in European Cultural Tradition*, vol. 9, edited by Martin Stannard and Greg Walker (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2000), 2.

<sup>172</sup> Rosslyn, *Tragic Plots*, 4-5.

female roles display heroic male virtues. Although the shift has focused in name and gender of the character, the heroism and virtue still remains focused upon male characteristics and behaviors. The focus on heroic male virtue rather than female virtue is the same for ancient Greek dramas and for eighteenth century and modern operas. Therefore, virtue is generally seen through a male perspective, rather than a female one.

In ancient dramas, playwrights questioned what is and what should be, and challenged virtue and gender roles. The challenge to male heroic virtue came in the form of women's strength of will and intellect. In Euripides, enraged heroic male characters often confronted these formidable women and made "some of the most bitterly misogynistic speeches in drama as a result; and [Euripides's] heroines make some of the most intelligent feminist answers."<sup>173</sup> This challenge was not limited to Euripides: throughout the centuries playwrights and composers alike examined gender roles and the essence of ancient Greek and contemporary virtues, as well as the meaning of virtue and gender within the context of their societies. An example is Admète's attack on Alceste's character when he discovered she sacrificed herself in his stead in Gluck's *Alceste* (1776). He furiously berated her saying:

"What gives you the right to dispose of your life? Laws of marriage keep you bound to my law. Your life and every moment you breathe belong to me. You betrayed your husband and your family. How can you steal from them without being a criminal?"<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Rosslyn, *Tragic Plots*, 65.

<sup>174</sup> *Alceste*, DVD, directed by Brian Large (2008; English Baroque Period Ensemble and the Monteverdi Choir, UK: EMI Classics, 2009).



In what was, as the chorus proclaimed, “a selfless gesture of perfect virtue,” Admète admonished his wife for her lack of virtue.<sup>175</sup> Ironically, in the same act of the opera Gluck portrayed Alceste as ultimately virtuous and had the chorus praise her saying “such grace, such beauty, her love, such virtue.”<sup>176</sup> The explicit challenge to heroic male and female virtues, as well as playwrights’ and composers’ questioning the gods, fate, and the workings of the mind, found fertile ground in the audiences of their time. The same can be said for audiences today. According to Edith Hall, “the mythical, dysfunctional, conflicted world portrayed in the archetypal roles of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides has become one of the most important cultural and aesthetic prisms through which the real, dysfunctional, conflicted world of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries has refracted its own image.”<sup>177</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The widespread appeal of myth is unmistakable. This may be because myth allows audiences to experience historically based stories with characters who are pushed to the extremes of love, hate, sanity and other aspects of the human condition. The essence of drama is effectively embodied in myth. Despite whatever social, artistic, individual, or intellectual agendas the operas of Handel, Gluck, and Strauss may have

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<sup>175</sup> *Alceste*, DVD.

<sup>176</sup> *Alceste*, DVD.

<sup>177</sup> Edith Hall, "Introduction: Why Greek Tragedy in the Late Twentieth Century," In *Dionysis Since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*, edited by Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh, and Amanda Wrigley (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004) 2.

imposed on the myth, the Greek dramas of Euripides and Sophocles retained overwhelming audience favor. In all the operas discussed, ideal female Greek virtues were never completely followed and were cloaked by a veil of acceptable male behaviors, which in turn were unacceptable when present in female characters. According to Helene Foley, "Greek tragedies [were] inclined to blame female figures for everything that goes wrong" and their virtue was blemished because of this misfortune.<sup>178</sup>

Our concept of modern virtue, which is the filter through which we interpret most drama, is a balance between the ancient male, *polis*, and female, *oikos*. Ancient Greek dramatists saw a moral need to point out conflict between the two in order to point out the need for balance and harmony between them. In opera, mingling the virtuous and the unvirtuous traits within one character heightened the dramatic impact and provided empathy and resolution for main characters.

In the House of Atreus, Agamemnon's daughters did not meet the female Greek ideal in one or more aspects, but all exhibited some form of honor or virtue in the operas. They were depicted as both virtuous and unvirtuous because, in opera, there is a symmetry, where virtue and gender must become mutual and equal in order to please the audience.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Helene Foley, "Bad Women: Gender Politics in Late Twentieth-Century Performance and Revision of Greek Tragedy," in *Dionysis Since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*, edited by Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh, and Amanda Wrigley (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004) 104-105.

<sup>179</sup> Ahearne-Kroll, "The Portrayal of Aseneth," 43-46.

Opera struggles to remain loyal to both virtue and gender, and to enhance and highlight the power and subjugation of the characters in the drama. Likewise, there must be an equal devotion to the plot as well as to the music. The relationship between light and dark, good and evil, unclean and pure, and male and female is essential in opera to ensure the intrigue, thrill and drama needed to captivate an audience, as well as to highlight issues concerning society and gender.<sup>180</sup> Without representing both sides equally, there is no symmetry, no balance and thus no power to meld the story, music and emotion together into one masterpiece, thus encapsulating the Greek ideal of tragedy. Agamemnon's daughters are all tragic heroines and each in her fashion is a victim, yet all evoke some sort of power to achieve what they want.

This multi-disciplined analysis, to include historical, literary, and cultural perspectives, showed how each opera highlighted the presence and absence of heroic virtue, how each opera exhibited gender roles, and how Agamemnon's daughters were presented both as heroic or virtuous and unvirtuous in the same production. The operas of Handel, Gluck and Strauss were fraught with cultural, societal, and philosophical implications and each composer answered these implications by changing the story and dialogue, as well as by cleverly characterizing each daughter through her own musical language. In *Oreste*, *Iphigénie en Tauride*, and *Elektra*, the

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<sup>180</sup> Thomas Marion Woodard, "Introduction," in *Sophocles: A Collection of Critical Essays*, compiled and edited by Thomas Marion Woodard (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996), 6-8; Virginia Woolf, "On Sophocles' *Electra*," in *Sophocles: A Collection of Critical Essays*, compiled and edited by Thomas Marion Woodard (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 122-123.

overt depictions of the duality of human nature through Agamemnon's daughters, the power of ancient visceral revenge, sacrifice, and love of Sophocles's and Euripides's stories, and the musical and librettic devices the composers used to embody them, all stand as testaments to ancient Greek virtue and heroic character through Agamemnon's daughters.

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APPENDIX A

ALPHABETICAL LIST OF NAMES

The following list has been compiled to show acceptable names and spellings used throughout literature and in different cultures to discuss the same person(s) or place(s) used in Greek myth within the parameters of this paper.

## A

Aides – Hades, Pluto, Plouton, Plutus, Ploutos, Haides, Aidas  
Achaeans – Greeks  
Achilles – Achilleus, Achille, Akhilleus  
Acis  
Aegisthus – Aegisthos, Aegisth, Aegistheus  
Aeneas – Énée, Aineias  
Aeropagus  
Aerope – Aërope  
Agamemnon  
Ajax – Aias  
Alcides – Hercules, Herakles, Heracles, Alkeides  
Alexander – Paris, Paride, Alexandros  
Alyssa – Dido, Didon  
Aphrodite – Venus, Hathor, Vénus  
Apollo – Apollon, Apellon, Apeilon, Aploun, Apulu, Apollo Helios, Apollyon  
Ares – Mars  
Ariadne- Arianna, Ariadna  
Artemis – Diana, Diane  
Athena – Minerva, Athene, Athina, Pallas Athena, Athenaia, Athenaie, Athana, Menerwa, Minerva Medica, Minerva Achaea, Minerve  
Atreides – Atrides, Atrida, (sons of Atreus – Menelaus & Agamemnon, the term is sometimes used when talking about other descendents of Atreus *i.e.* Orestes and Iphigenia are a son and a daughter of Atreides)  
Atreus

## B

Broteas

## C

Calchas  
Cassandra – Cassandre  
Castor – Kastor  
Ceres – Demeter  
Chrysothemis – Khrysothemis  
Clytaemnestra – Chlytaemnestra, Clytemnestra, Chlytemnestra, Clitemnestre, Clitemnestra, Klytaemnestra, Klytemnestra  
Cupid – Cupidon

## D

Daphne - Dafne

Demeter – Ceres, Damater

Dejanira – Deianira, Deianeira, Deïanira

Diana – Diane, Artemis

Dido – Alyssa, Didon

Dionysis – Bacchus, Dionysus, Dionysos, Dioynsius

## E

Electra – Elektra, Laodice, Electre, Elettra

Elena – Helen, Helene

Erinyes – Furies, Erinys

Eris

Ermione – Hermione

Euridice – Eurydice, Erudice

## F

Filotete – Philoctetes, Philocthetes

Furies – Erinyes

## G

Galatea

Greeks – Achaeans

## H

Hades – Pluto, Plouton, Plutus , Plutos, Haides, Aides, Aidas

Hector – Hektor

Helen – Helene, Elena, Hélène

Hephaestus – Vulcan, Hephaistos, Vulcanus, Sethlans

Hera – Juno, Junon

Hercules – Herakles, Heracles, Alcides, Alkeides

Hermes – Mercury, Mercure, Mercurius

Hermione – Ermione

Hestia – Vesta

Hippodamia – Hippodamea, Hippodameia

Hyllus – Hyllas, Hylas

## I

Iole – Iöle, Iolë

Iphigenia – Iphigeneia, Ifigenia, Ifigeneia, Iphigénie

## J

Juno – Hera, Junon

Jupiter – Zeus, Jove, Iuppiter

## K

Kastor – Castor

Klytaemnestra – Klytemnestra, Klytaimnestra, Clytaemnestra,  
Chlytaemnestra, Clytemnestra, Chlytemnestra

Khrysothemis – Chrysothemis

## L

Laodice – Electra, Elektra, Electre, Elettra

## M

Mars – Ares

Menelaus – Menelaos

Mercury – Hermes, Mercure, Mercurius

Minerva – Athena, Athene, Athina, Pallas Athena, Athenaia, Athenaie,  
Athana, Menerwa, Minerva Medica, Minerva Achaea, Minerve

Myrtilus

## N

Neptune – Neptunus, Poseidon, Posidon

## O

Odysseus – Ulysses, Odusseus, Ulixes

Oenomaus

Oenone

Orestes – Oreste, Orest

Orpheus – Orfeo, Orphée

## P - R

Paris – Paride, Alexander, Alexandros

Pelops

Pelopias – Pelopea, Pelopeia

Penelope – Penelopeia

Philoctetes – Filotete, Philocthetes

Pluto – Hades, Plouton, Plutus, Plutos, Haides, Aides, Aidas

Poseidon – Posidon, Neputune, Neptunus

Priam

Pylades – Pylade, Pilades, Pilade

## S

Strophius

## T

Tantalus – Tantalos

Tartarus – Tartaros

Theseus - Teseo

Thoas – Toante

Thyestes

Tyndareus – Tyndareos

## U

Ulysses - Odysseus

## V - Y

Venus – Aphrodite, Hathor, Vénus

Vesta – Hestia

Vulcan – Hephaestus, Hephaistos, Vulcanus, Sethlans

## Z

Zeus – Jupiter, Jove, Iuppiter

## APPENDIX B

### ALPHABETICAL LIST OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA EXAMPLES AND THEIR CORRELATING MYTHS

The following list has been compiled to show what myths are present in the contemporary media examples discussed in this paper.

*Battlestar Galactica*

A retelling of Virgil's Aeneid and the fall of Troy  
The Quorum of Twelve, the planet Kobol, and referring to marriage as a "sealing" are all derived from the Mormon religion  
Polytheistic religion is derived from Greek mythology – twelve colonies are named after astrological zodiac signs from Greek mythology  
Twelve Tribes are derived from Twelve Tribes of Israel described in the Bible  
Book of Pythia describes the Oracle and depicts the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi from Greek Mythology  
Names of the main characters are mostly derived from classical myth and ancient Rome

*The Boys from Syracuse*

Merging of two comic plots of Plautus, plus the appearance of twins which is a rendition of the Gemini (Castor and Pollux)

*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

Odysseus and Hercules

*Dune*

The Atreides Myth – characters named Atreides (i.e. Duke Leto Atreides)

*Frosty the Snowman*

This story parallels myths of the dying god like Dionysus, Prometheus, and Adonis

*Greystoke (Tarzan)*

Hercules

Re-interpreted adventures from Homer's *The Odyssey*

*Harry Potter: The Philosopher's Stone, The Chamber of Secrets, Prisoner of Azkaban, The Goblet of Fire, The Order of the Phoenix, and The Half Blood Prince, and The Deathly Hollows*

All stories follow the basic mythic pattern of a hero's quest – journey into the underworld to face death (Lord Voldemort and death itself in the stories) and overcome it (him)

Harry's symbolic death in these stories may also allude to the dying god myth

*His Girl Friday*

Pandora's Box

*The Hunger Games*

The Panathenaic Games and the Tribute Myth – Theseus and the Minotaur

*The Lion King*

Oedipus Myth (Simba does not kill his father but his Uncle)  
Blood curse of the House of Atreus (Agamemnon and Menelaus)  
Trip to underworld (Bone Yard – Hades)  
Three hyenas symbolize the three-headed dog Cerberus  
Timon and Pumbaa - comic stock characters of Plautus and Terence

*Magnum P.I.*

Classic *miles* character - Higgins  
Classical hero - Magnum  
Higgins's two dogs are named Apollo and Zeus

*My Fair Lady*

Theme from Pygmalion and Galatea, Daedalus, Hephaestus, Talos, Pandora and Zeus myths

*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

Odysseus/Ulysses - Ulysses Everett McGill  
Polyphemus (the Cyclops) - Daniel "Big Dan" Teague  
Homer's *The Odyssey*  
Odysseus and the Sirens

*The Rocky Horror Picture Show*

Dionysus myths and discovery of self, nature of man

*Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*

Roman myth of *The Rape of the Sabine Women*

\*Note: The word in the title "Rape" comes from the Latin word "raptio" which in ancient terms meant "abduction" rather than sexual violation.

*Stand By Me*

Nestor, wise man /advisor – Chris Chambers  
Basic mythic pattern of a hero's quest – journey into the underworld (wilderness in the movie) to face death and overcome it



### *Stargate*

Various myths and mythological characters make appearances throughout the seasons

### *Star Trek*

The entire premise of the science fiction entertainment franchise *Star Trek*, beginning with its inception in 1966 through its next film released in 2013 entitled *Star Trek Into Darkness* is based on Greek and Roman myths starting with the heroes Odysseus, Theseus, and Aeneas

### *Star Trek Voyager*

Jason and the Argonauts

### *Star Wars*

Orpheus - Luke Skywalker

Orpheus uses magical powers - "The Force"

Gemini (Castor and Pollux) - Luke and Leia are twins

Theseus and the Minotaur stories

Odysseus - Han Solo

Homer's *The Odyssey* – the stop over in the cave of Polyphemus (the Cyclops) - in *The Empire Strikes Back* – Han Solo, Leia, and Chewbacca hid from Lord Vader's pursuing fleet in a cave in an asteroid belt. The cave turned out to be a giant asteroid worm. The passengers of the *Millennium Falcon* narrowly escaped and flew out just before its jaws shut.

Nestor, a wise old man, stock character - Obi-Wan Kenobi

"The Golden Age never to be repeated" theme, which appears throughout *The Illiad* (Achilles involvement in the Trojan War) – in *Star Wars* this is referred to as the time of the Jedi Knights and the Republic

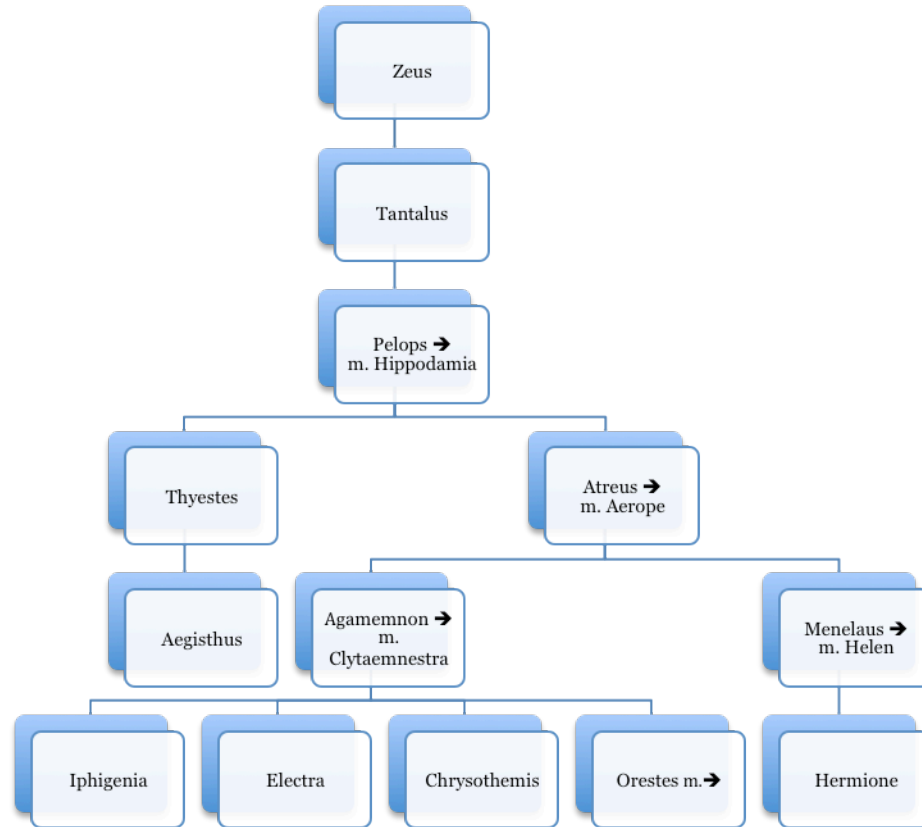
### *Supernatural*

Various myths and mythological characters make appearances throughout the seasons

## APPENDIX C

### THE HOUSE OF ATREUS FAMILY TREE AND MYTH

## The House of Atreus



The House of Atreus, or the House of Pelops as it was sometimes called, was one of the most unfortunate families in Greek myth. Tantalus's and Pelops's crimes against the gods were the reasons for the curse placed on the family. The curse was passed down from generation to generation and to all who married into it. The curse manifested in the murder, war, cannibalism, incest, human sacrifice, and tragedy surrounding this family.

### Tantalus and Pelops

Tantalus, King of Tantalus in Lydia and a favorite of the gods, was asked to dine with the gods on Olympus. In order to test the gods's omniscience, he sacrificed his own son Pelops, cut him into pieces, cooked and served him up to the gods. In addition, he stole nectar and ambrosia, took them back to his people, and told them the secrets of the gods. The gods were so furious, they doomed him to the worst place in Hades: Tartarus, where he stands for all eternity under a fruit tree where the fruit remains forever out of his grasp, and in a pool of water which water recedes everytime he tries to drink.

After the gods brought Pelops back to life, Poseidon took him up to Olympus and made him his apprentice and lover. He taught Pelops how to drive a divine chariot. After growing to manhood, Pelops wanted to marry Hippodamia, whose father, King Oenomaus stipulated that only the man who could beat him in a chariot race would win her hand. King Oenomaus, having bested and killed 12 previous suitors, agreed to race Pelops.

Afraid he might lose, Pelops invoked Poseidon's help with the race. Poseidon gave Pelops a chariot drawn by untamed winged horses. In spite of this gift, Pelops remained unsure and bribed Myrtilus, the man in charge of taking care of Oenomaus's chariot. He told Myrtilus that he could have half of the kingdom and Hippodamia's bed on the wedding night if he would let him sabotage the chariot. After the agreement was made and the sabotage was done, Oenomaus's chariot fell apart during the race and Oenomaus was dragged to death by his horses. Pelops did not honor his agreement with Myrtilus. In turn, Myrtilus attempts to rape Hippodamia and Pelops threw him over a sea cliff. As Myrtilus fell to his death, he cursed Pelops and his progeny.

### **Atreus and Thyestes**

Pelops's twin sons, Atreus and Thyestes, both wanted to rule Mycenae. Atreus, being the older of the two, became king. Later, Thyestes, had an affair with Atreus's wife, Aerope. In response to this betrayal, Atreus drowned his wife and killed his nephews, Thyestes's sons. Thyestes, wanting retribution, sought advice from an oracle. The oracle told him he would get revenge if he had a child with his daughter, Pelopia. Thus, Thyestes raped Pelopia and had a son named Aegisthus. Immediately following the rape, Pelopia struggled with her father, grabbed his sword and fended him off. Thyestes fled. Atreus, believing Pelopia to be a daughter of a different king, married her and raised Aegisthus as his own son.

Years pass. Atreus captured Thyestes. When Thyestes was in the throne room, he recognized his sword and the true identity of his son, Aegisthus. Thyestes told Aegisthus the truth about his father, and ordered Aegisthus to murder Atreus and usurp the throne, which he did. With Atreus dead, Thyestes ruled as King of Mycenae.

### **Agamemnon and Menelaus**

Agamemnon and Menelaus finishes growing up in Aetolia in exile. Once they reached adulthood, Tyndareus, the King of Sparta and father of Helen and Clytaemnestra, led the brothers back to Mycenae. Agamemnon and Menelaus, forced Thyestes to surrender the throne. Agamemnon became King of Mycenae and Menelaus became King of Sparta.

Agamemnon and Menelaus married Tyndareus's daughters after Agamemnon killed Clytaemnestra's first husband, Tantalus (descendant of Tantalus, son of Broteas and King of Pisa). After dispatching Tantalus, Agamemnon forced Clytaemnestra to marry him and murdered her infant son. When it was time for Helen to marry, there were so many suitors with opulent gifts, and not wanting to cause political conflict, Tyndareus allowed the suitors to draw straws for Helen's hand in marriage. Menelaus won and married Helen, and she became his trophy wife.

## **The Trojan War**

The Trojan War began with a dispute started by Eris, the mischievous goddess of strife and discord. In the presence of Aphrodite, Athena, and Hera, Eris threw down a golden apple marked with the words "for the fairest." An argument broke out between the three goddesses about who was the fairest of the three. Zeus selected Paris, Prince of Troy, to be the judge of the dispute because of his reputation for honesty and good judgment. In an attempt to sway his decision, Hera offered him the empirical power and riches, Athena offered him military glory and renown, and Aphrodite offered him the most beautiful woman in the world as a reward. Paris selected Aphrodite as the fairest and chose Helen as his reward.

Aphrodite made Helen fall in love with Paris and leave her husband. Paris abandoned his wife, Oenone, and escaped with Helen to Troy. The other two goddesses who were spurned in the initial dispute, Hera and Athena, were later on the side of the Greeks (also known as the Aechaens), who included Menelaus and Agamemnon, during the war.

Troy's acquisition of Helen enraged Menelaus. All the kings of Greece rallied to defend his honor and Agamemnon served as the leader of the Greek armies. Due to many setbacks, including bad weather, failed diplomatic efforts, and navigation issues, eight years passed. Finally, in the harbor at Aulis, the Greeks' staging area for the war, 1,013 ships full of troops were ready to sail to Troy; however, the winds were not in their favor.

With his fleet stuck at Aulis, Agamemnon consulted Calchas, the oracle, on what was to be done. Calchas said that Artemis was to blame for the lack of sailing wind. Artemis was angry with Agamemnon because he boasted about being a better hunter than she and also because he killed a deer in her sacred grove. Calchas said the only way Artemis would be appeased was if he sacrificed his daughter, Iphigenia. Agamemnon quickly sent for Iphigenia. He tricked Clytaemnestra into sending her daughter to Aulis by telling her that Iphigenia was to marry Achilles upon her arrival. Instead

of the promised wedding, Agamemnon sacrificed her in the temple at Aulis. Immediately following the sacrifice, favorable winds returned and the Greek fleet set sail for Troy.

After a nine-year siege, and many heroes lost, including Hector and Paris of Troy, and Ajax and Achilles of the Greeks, the final plan of Odysseus actually ended the battle. The Greeks built a hollow horse, (aka The Trojan Horse) and hid many soldiers led by Odysseus inside it. The Greeks offered the horse as tribute and pretended to leave having apparently given up. The Trojans, believing the war was over, accepted the horse as a victory trophy and brought it inside the city. After much wine and celebration, the Trojans went to sleep. Once the city was quiet, the Greeks came out from the horse and massacred the Trojans in their sleep.

### **After the War**

After years of war and bloodshed, Menelaus and Helen returned home. When Agamemnon returned to Mycenae, he brought back his *thymé* and concubine, Cassandra, King Priam's daughter and Princess of Troy. While he had been gone, his wife, Clytaemnestra had taken Aegisthus, his cousin, as her lover. Upon Agamemnon's arrival at the palace, Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus brutally murdered Agamemnon, Clytaemnestra striking the final blow with an axe, decapitating Agamemnon. Immediately following, she searched the palace for Cassandra. Having found her outside, Clytaemnestra decapitated Cassandra with the same axe with which she slaughtered Agamemnon.

Upon discovery of her mother's malicious deeds, to protect her young brother, Orestes, Electra smuggled him out of the city to be raised safely in exile by King Strophius of Phocis (their uncle, as he was married to Agamemnon's sister).

With Agamemnon out of the way, Clytaemnestra married Aegisthus and took the throne. Electra was engaged to marry her cousin Castor of Sparta. Aegisthus feared that once Electra married, she would have a son who would, in time, avenge her family. He forbade the marriage and decreed that no man would be suitable for her. Clytaemnestra, being superstitious and fearing retribution from the gods, convinced Aegisthus to allow Electra to marry a peasant, who had taken a vow of chastity. The unseemly marriage left Electra childless, in poverty, and in a perpetual state of grief, being constantly reminded of the crimes done against her and her family by Aegisthus and her mother.

After Orestes grew up, he returned to Mycenae. Upon reuniting with Electra at the tomb of their father, they plotted their long overdue revenge. Orestes, having prayed to and having received the blessing of Apollo, went

into action. Orestes, dressed in disguise, went into the palace as a messenger. Once safely inside, he reported the sad news to Clytaemnestra that her son, Orestes, was dead. Overjoyed and wanting to share the news with Aegisthus, Clytaemnestra calls him inside. Unsuspecting and unarmed, Aegisthus entered the palace. Orestes pulled out his sword and struck him down. Not listening to his mother's cries for mercy, he decapitated her with one blow, thus avenging his father's murder. Due to his crime of matricide (which offended both the gods and men), the Erinyes (aka the Furies) relentlessly pursued Orestes as punishment.

Menelaus and Helen arrive at the palace. Consumed by grief and tormented by the Erinyes, Orestes had not washed or eaten since the murders. He asked Menelaus for help. Menelaus was reluctant to help because of the political implications the matricide might have, especially on facing the ruling court, the Aeropagus. The Aeropagus wanted to have Orestes and Electra stoned for their crimes. Knowing this was a losing battle, Menelaus tried to distance himself from both of them, and set his daughter, Hermione up in the palace to rule in Clytaemnestra's place. Pylades, Orestes friend and their cousin, married Electra.

Not knowing what to do, Orestes consulted the Oracle at Delphi for counsel. The oracle told him to go to Tauris and bring back the statue of Artemis from the temple.

With new hope, Orestes, accompanied by Pylades, set sail.

## **Tauris**

Unbeknownst to all who were present when Agamemnon appeared to sacrifice Iphigenia in Aulis, Artemis actually replaced her with a deer and carried her off to the island of Tauris wrapped in a cloud. During the 12 years or so following the sacrifice, Iphigenia had secretly served Artemis as the High Priestess in her Temple.

When Pylades and Orestes arrived on shore, guards arrested them and because they were not Taurians, they were sentenced to be sacrificed to Artemis at the temple. During the preparations for the sacrifice, Iphigenia and Orestes recognized each other. Not wanting to go through with the sacrifice, Iphigenia devised a plan to deceive King Thoas of Tauris. She explained to Thoas that the victim was unfit for sacrifice because he committed matricide. She told Thoas she needed to take Orestes and the statue of Artemis into the sea to be purified. Thoas agreed so they took the statue and both prisoners down to the sea and boarded a ship. Poseidon aided in their quick escape by calming the seas. Pylades, Orestes and Iphigenia, returned safely home to Greece.

## The End of the Curse

Orestes was still plagued with the issue of the Aeropagus's sentencing. Apollo and Orestes turned to Athena for aid in ending the dispute. Athena argued Orestes's case and the jury gave a split verdict. In response, Athena, who was born from the head of her father, Zeus, without a mother, deemed mothers as being less important than fathers in the production of children, cast the deciding vote in favor of Orestes, ending the curse on the House of Atreus. After he was acquitted, the Erinyes stopped pursuing Orestes.

Upon his return and acquittal, Orestes married his cousin Hermione. Both Electra and Orestes went on to have children of their own.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Malcom Day, *100 Characters from Classical Mythology: Discover the Fascinating Stories of the Greek and Roman Deities*. Hauppauge NY: Barron's Educational Series, 2007; John Gassner and Ralph Allen, "The House of Atreus," in *Theatre and Drama in the Making*, compiled and edited by John Gassner and Ralph Allen (New York: Applause Books, 1992), 48-49; William Hansen, *Handbook of Classical Mythology* (Santa Barbara, CA: ACB-CLIO, 2004); Homer, "The Story of Agamemnon (from *The Odyssey*)," in *Theatre and Drama in the Making*, compiled and edited by John Gassner and Ralph Allen (New York: Applause Books, 1992) 50-54; Hugh Lloyd-Jones, "Artemis and Iphigeneia," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 103 (1983), 87-102, accessed 10 October 2011, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/stable/630530>; Morford, *Classical Mythology*; Stanford University Classics Department, The Mortal Women of the Trojan War page; and Thomas Bullfinch, *Bullfinch's Mythology*, 2003 Ed. (New York: Random House, 2003). The Atreus Myth was summarized from multiple sources concerning Greek Myth and was cross-referenced for the most accurate version possible. No one version of the myth is absolute in that there are numerous versions of the myth depending on the source. The version compiled here was based on the most prevalent renditions of the myth.



APPENDIX D

DRAMATIS PERSONAE AND SYNOPSES

# *ELECTRA*

by Sophocles

## Dramatis Personae:

ELECTRA, sister of Orestes, daughter of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra

ORESTES, son of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra

CHRYSOTHEMIS, sister of Orestes

AN OLD MAN, formerly the Paedagogus or Attendant of Orestes

CLYTAEMNESTRA, mother of Orestes, Electra, and Chrysothemis

AEGISTHUS, husband of Clytaemnestra and cousin of Agamemnon

CHORUS OF WOMEN OF MYCENAE

## Mute Persons:

PYLADES, son of Strophius, King of Crisa, the friend of Orestes

HANDMAID OF CLYTAEMNESTRA

TWO ATTENDANTS OF ORESTES

## Backstory:

King Agamemnon of Mycenae (or Argos in some versions of the myth) had returned from the Trojan War with his new mead, or concubine, Cassandra. His wife, Clytaemnestra, who had borne a grudge against Agamemnon for many years since he had sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia at the start of the Trojan War in order to placate the gods, and who had in the meantime taken Agamemnon's ambitious cousin Aegisthus as a lover, killed both Agamemnon and Cassandra. Orestes, Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra's infant son, was sent abroad to Phocis for his own safety, while his sister Electra remained in Mycenae (although more or less reduced to the status of servant), as did their younger sister Chrysothemis (who, however, did not protest or look for vengeance against their mother and Aegisthus).

## Synopsis:

As the play begins, many years after Agamemnon's death, Orestes, now a grown man, arrives in Mycenae in secret with his friend Pylades of Phocis and an old attendant or tutor. They hatch a plan to gain entrance to Clytaemnestra's palace by announcing that Orestes was dead, and that the two men (really Orestes and Pylades) are arriving to deliver an urn with his remains.

Electra has never come to terms with her father Agamemnon's murder, and laments his death to the Chorus of Mycenaean women. She argues bitterly with her sister Chrysothemis over her accommodation with her father's killers, and with her mother, whom she had never forgiven for the murder. Her only hope is that one day her brother Orestes will return to avenge Agamemnon.

When the messenger (the old man of Phocis) arrives with news of the death of Orestes, Electra is devastated, although Clytaemnestra is relieved to hear it. Chrysothemis mentions that she has seen some offerings and a lock of hair at Agamemnon's tomb and concludes that Orestes must have returned. Electra dismisses her arguments, convinced that Orestes is now dead. Electra proposes to her sister that it is now up to them to kill their hated step-father Aegisthus. Chrysothemis refuses to help, pointing out the impracticality of the plan.

When Orestes arrives at the palace, carrying the urn supposedly containing his own ashes, he does not recognize Electra at first, nor she him. Belatedly realizing who she is, though, Orestes reveals his identity to his emotional sister, who almost betrays his identity in her excitement and joy that he is alive.

With Electra now involved in their plan, Orestes and Pylades enter the house and slay his mother, Clytaemnestra, while Electra keeps watch for Aegisthus. They hide her corpse under a sheet and present it to Aegisthus when he returns home, claiming it to be the body of Orestes. When Aegisthus lifts the veil to discover his dead wife, Orestes reveals himself, and the play ends as Aegisthus is escorted off to be killed at the hearth, the same location Agamemnon was slain.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Classical Literature, *Ancient Greece Sophocles Electra*, accessed 31 July 2012, [http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece\\_sophocles\\_electra.html](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_sophocles_electra.html). Synopsis and dramatis personae taken from this website in entirety.

## *IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS*

by Euripides

### Dramatis Personae:

IPHIGENIA, daughter of Agamemnon  
ORESTES, brother of Iphigenia  
PYLADES, friend of Orestes  
THOAS, King of the Taurians  
HERDSMAN  
MESSENGER  
ATHENA, goddess of war, wisdom and crafts  
CHORUS OF GREEK WOMEN  
CAPTIVES  
ATTENDANTS ON IPHIGENIA

### Synopsis:

In the prologue to the play, Iphigenia explains how she had narrowly avoided death by sacrifice at the hands of her father, Agamemnon when the goddess Artemis, to whom the sacrifice was to be made, intervened and replaced her on the altar at the last moment with a deer, saving her from death and sweeping her off to distant Tauris. There, she has been made a priestess at the temple of Artemis, and given the gruesome task of ritually sacrificing any foreigners who land on the shores of King Thoas's kingdom of Tauris. Iphigenia also recounts a dream she has recently had which suggested that her brother, Orestes, was dead.

Soon after this, Orestes himself, accompanied by his friend Pylades enters. Orestes explains how, after being acquitted by the gods and the state of Athens for killing his mother to avenge his father, Apollo has required him to perform one last act of penance, to steal a sacred statue of Artemis from Tauris and bring it back to Athens.

Unfortunately, Orestes and Pylades are captured by Taurian guards and brought to the temple to be killed, according to the local custom. Iphigenia who has not seen her brother since his childhood and believes him dead, is about to commence the sacrifice, when chance causes their relationship to be discovered (Iphigenia plans to use one of the captured Greeks to convey a letter and, after a contest of friendship between the two in which each insists on sacrificing his own life for that of his comrade, it becomes apparent that Orestes himself is the intended recipient of the letter).

After a touching scene of reunion, Iphigenia and Orestes devise a plan to escape together. Iphigenia tells King Thoas that the statue of Artemis has been spiritually polluted by her murderer brother, and advises him to make the

foreigners cleanse the idol in the sea to remove the dishonor that she, as its keeper, has brought upon it. The three Greeks use this as an opportunity to escape on Orestes's and Pylades's ship, taking the statue with them.

Despite the attempts of the Chorus of Greek slaves to mislead him, King Thoas finds out from a messenger that the Greeks have escaped. He vows to pursue and kill them as their escape is delayed by adverse winds. He is stopped by the goddess Athena, who appears at the end of the play to give instructions to the characters. Athena bids the Greeks convey the statue to Greece and establish the worship of Artemis Tauropolus (although with milder offerings substituted for the barbaric human sacrifices) at Halae and Brauron, where Iphigenia is to become a priestess. Awed by the goddess' show of power, Thoas submits and also frees the Chorus of Greek slaves.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Classical Literature, *Ancient Greece Euripides Iphigenia in Tauris* accessed 31 July 2012, [http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece\\_euripides\\_iphigenia\\_tauris.html](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_iphigenia_tauris.html). Synopsis and dramatis personae taken from this website in entirety.

# COMPARATIVE OPERA CHART

<b>OPERA</b> Composer Librettist Premiere Genre Act Structure	<b>ORESTE</b> G. F. Handel (adapted from G. Barlocci's <i>L'Oreste</i> ) London, 1734 <i>Pasticcio opera seria</i> Three Acts	<b>IPHIGÉNIE EN TAURIDE</b> C.W. von Gluck N. Guillard (after G. del la Touche's play <i>Iphigénie en Tauride</i> ) Paris, 1779 <i>Tragédie</i> Four Acts	<b>ELEKTRA</b> R. Strauss H. von Hofmannsthal Dresden, 1909 <i>Tragödie</i> One Act
<i>Fifth Century BCE</i> Drama Author Homeric Source	<i>Iphigenia in Tauris</i> Euripides <i>The Illiad</i>	<i>Iphigenia in Tauris</i> Euripides <i>The Illiad</i>	<i>Electra</i> Sophocles <i>The Odyssey</i>
Opera role differences from the original drama	<u>Added:</u> Hermione Philoctetes  <u>Deleted:</u> Athena Herdsman Messengers Chorus of Greek Women Captives Iphigenia's Attendants	<u>Added:</u> Artemis First and Second Priestesses A Scythian Minister of the Sanctuary A Greek Woman  <u>Deleted:</u> Athena	<u>Added:</u> Clytaemnestra's Confidante Young and Old Servants Overseer Five Maids Male chorus members  <u>Deleted:</u> Pylades Orestes's Two Attendants
Opera plot differences from the original drama	-Three acts not one -No female Greek chorus & prologue -No recognition scene -Love interests: Iphigenia & Philoctetes, Orestes & Hermione, Thoas & Hermione -Iphigenia exploits Philoctetes love -Iphigenia threatens to kill Thoas -Thoas killed at end -No deities involved -Orestes is married	-Four acts not one -Iphigenia's prologue omitted, starts with storm scene and telling of dream -Gluck substituted Artemis for Athena to simplify plot -Thoas killed at end -Iphigenia does the sacrifice instead of men in the temple -Cleansing of statue at the end eliminated -Happy ending and escape happens after the goddesses' arrival on the scene	-Clytaemnestras's Handmaiden/Trainbearer is now a speaking role -Men added to the female Greek chorus -Maids used as prologue -Chorus is unsympathetic to her situation and lamentation -Seduction scene added -Opera begins with chorus scene followed by Electra's monologue instead of Orestes and Pylades arrival -presentation of Clytaemnestra's corpse omitted -Electra dies at end

# *ORESTE*

by George Frideric Handel

Dramatis Personae:<sup>184</sup>

ORESTE	Alto-Castrato
ERMIONE, wife of Oreste	Soprano
IFIGENIA, sister of Oreste	Soprano
PILADE, friend of Oreste	Tenor
TOANTE, king of Tauris	Bass
FILOTETE, captain of Toante	Contralto

Backstory:

Upon returning home after winning a ten-year siege of Troy, Agamemnon, king of the Greeks, was murdered by his wife, Clytaemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus. Clytaemnestra usurped her son, Oreste's, right to the throne, and claimed it for herself and her new husband, Aegisthus. Years pass and Oreste, now an adult, killed Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra, while seeking to avenge his father's death and to reclaim his rightful place on the throne. Oreste, mad with grief and remorse, and tormented daily by the Furies consults the Oracle to find a way to end his torment. The Oracle tells him to travel to the island of Tauris and to let himself be sacrificed at the Temple of Diana. Thus, Oreste travels to Tauris with his most faithful friend, Pilade.

Act I

At the beginning of the opera Ifigenia finds Oreste in the sacred grove of Diana, without realizing that she is in the presence of her brother until she talks with him. Upon her own discovery of his true identity, Ifigenia wants to save Oreste from the danger of sacrificial death. Keeping this secret to herself, she asks Filotete, Toante's captain, with whom she is in love, to support her in saving Oreste. He agrees in order to win her.

In the meantime, Ermione, Oreste's wife, reaches the harbor of Tauris in her search for her husband. She encounters Pilade, Oreste's true friend, and both are arrested by Filotete, for they are foreigners and therefore sentenced to death. Toante, however, falls in love with Ermione and desires her. Ermione rejects his advances.

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<sup>184</sup> The dramatis personae in the original score uses Latin spellings for role titles and English translations, rather than their corresponding Italian spellings which are in the score's music.

## Act II

Oreste is in the forecourt of the temple when Pilade is dragged in by the guards. Oreste enlists himself in his cause, and Toante orders to have Oreste killed too. Oreste is ready to fight, but Ifigenia, in an effort to save him from ruin, stops the fight. Oreste delivers himself up. She exploits Filotete's love, frees the imprisoned Oreste, and shows him the way to the sea, but he hesitates to flee without his friend, Pilade. Finally, Ermione, following her husband's trail, encounters Oreste. Toante surprises them while they are embracing and has both taken prisoner.

## Act III

Toante offers Ermione Oreste's life and freedom if she is willing to be his, but she rejects his offer and prefers chains. Toante urges Ifigenia to sacrifice Oreste on the sacrificial altar. Ermione intervenes, demanding that she be killed, but she is removed from the temple. Pilade pretends to be Oreste in order to die in his place. Oreste will not accept this sacrifice, and now both claim to be Oreste. Ermione is brought back to identify Oreste, but she is not prepared to do so, even when threatened with death.

As a final complication of the situation, Ifigenia reveals that she is Oreste's sister. When Toante thereupon demands that she kill Pilade and Oreste, she threatens to kill him first. Filotete takes her side, and the conflict comes to a head. A fight ensues, and Toante is killed. The people have been liberated, Oreste and Ermione have been reunited, brother and sister have been brought together, and Oreste has overcome his emotional torments.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Handel House Museum, accessed 10 July 2012, <http://www.handelhouse.org/discover/george-frideric-handel/opera-synopses/terpsicore-and-oreste>. Synopsis is taken in its entirety from this website.



## IPHIGÉNIE EN TAURIDE

by Christoph Willibald von Gluck

Dramatis Personae:<sup>186</sup>

IPHIGÉNIE	Soprano
THOAS, king of Tauris	Bass
ORESTE, brother of Iphigénie	Baritone
PYLADE, friend of Oreste	Tenor
PREMIÈRE PRÊTRESSE, priestess	Soprano
DEUXIÈME PRÊTRESSE, priestess	Soprano
DIANE, goddess of the moon and hunting	Soprano
UN SCYTHE, a Scythian	Bass
LE MINISTRE, a minister of the sanctuary	Bass
UNE FEMME GRECQUE, a Greek woman	Soprano

Backstory:

When Agamemnon gathered the Greek armies before the Trojan War, the goddess Diane sent unfavorable winds to prevent them from sailing. Her oracle set a condition: to earn the right to sail forth, Agamemnon must sacrifice his daughter. He accepted these terms and killed his young daughter Iphigénie on the altar. In his play *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Euripides imagines that Diane saved Iphigénie and delivered her to distant Tauride, where Iphigénie served the enemy Scythians as Diane's high priestess— but Iphigénie's family believed her dead.

Act I

Fifteen years later, a storm batters Diane's temple at Tauride. Iphigénie and the other priestesses—all of them captives from Greece—ask the gods for safety and peace from the storms raging both outside and within their hearts. Iphigénie relates a dream: her home was destroyed; her father was killed by her mother, Clytemnestre, who gave her a dagger; her brother Oreste cried out to her for help, but she was forced to kill him. The priestesses grieve with Iphigénie and urge her not to lose hope that she will see Oreste again (“Ô toi qui prolonges mes jours”).

The Scythian king, Thoas, comes to Iphigénie in despair, followed everywhere by omens and voices calling for his downfall. Oracles have ordered him to sacrifice every stranger to the country to end his torment. His soldiers come with news of new captives—two Greek men—and Thoas orders Iphigénie to kill them on the altar. The Greeks are brought in: one is half-mad, haunted by past crimes, the other defies Thoas. They are imprisoned as the Scythians call for blood.

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<sup>186</sup> Christoph Willibald von Gluck, *Iphigénie en Tauride: Tragédie Opéra*, libretto by Nicolas-François Guillard. Vocal score by Jürgen Sommer. German translation by Peter Schmidt. (Kassel, Germany: Bärenreiter, 1983). The dramatis personae are from this source.

## Act II

The strangers are Oreste and his lifelong friend Pylade. Oreste, who has killed his mother and is pursued by the Furies, lives on the edge of madness; now he feels responsible for Pylade's imminent death ("Dieux qui me poursuivez"). Pylade calms Oreste with the pledge that they will die together ("Unis dès la plus tendre enfance"). Pylade is taken away, and Oreste sinks gradually into sleep ("La calme rentre dans mon coeur"), but the Furies stalk him even in his dreams. He awakens from a nightmare to find Iphigénie standing before him. Without revealing her identity she questions him about the royal family in Mycène, and he tells her all: Clytemnestre murdered Agamemnon to avenge the death of Iphigénie, Oreste struck down Clytemnestre to avenge his father and then, he adds, Oreste killed himself. Iphigénie sends the stranger to be shackled to the altar, and—now without country, kindred or hope—mourns the loss of her family ("Ô malheureuse Iphigénie").

## Act III

Iphigénie feels a strong kinship with the prisoner ("D'une image, hélas!"). She resolves to save at least one of the captives and to send the survivor to Mycène with a letter for her sister, Electre. Pylade, who has been tortured, is reunited with Oreste, and Iphigénie tells them Oreste must live and carry the sealed letter (trio: "Je pourrais du tyran"). Pylade is happy to die for his friend's life ("Ah! mon ami"). Oreste, determined that he himself should die, seizes the sacrificial knife and threatens to take his own life if Iphigénie will not spare Pylade. Iphigénie gives Pylade the letter and helps him escape.

## Act IV

Iphigénie tries repeatedly to perform the sacrifice, but she cannot bring herself to harm the stranger and cries out angrily against Diane ("Je t'implore et je tremble"). Oreste is brought in ("Que ces regrets touchant"). Touched by Iphigénie's sadness and her concern for him, he tries to encourage her to do her duty, calling out in the final moment, "Iphigénie, beloved sister, thus also did you perish at Aulide." Sister and brother realize the truth. Thoas bursts in: Iphigénie's plot has been discovered. He orders the Greek killed immediately and is about to sacrifice Oreste himself when Pylade returns with Greek soldiers to save his friend. Thoas is killed in the fray, which is halted when Diane herself appears to pardon Oreste, quiet the Furies, set the Greek women free, and send prince and princess home to Mycène—and the first happiness they have known since before the Greeks set sail for Troy.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> The Metropolitan Opera, *Iphigénie en Tauride Synopsis*, accessed 30 July 2012, <http://www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/history/stories/synopsis.aspx?id=206>. The backstory and synopsis were taken from this source in entirety.

# *ELEKTRA*

by Richard Strauss

## Dramatis Personae:

ELEKTRA	Soprano
CHRYSOTHEMIS, sister of Elektra	Soprano
KLYTÄMNESTRA, mother of Elektra	Mezzo-soprano
AEGISTH, husband of Klytämnestra	Tenor
OREST, brother of Elektra	Baritone
DER PFLEGER DES OREST, tutor of Orest	Bass
DIE VERTRAUTE, confidante of Klytämnestra	Soprano
DIE SCHLEPPENTRÄGERIN, trainbearer of Klytämnestra	Soprano
EIN JUNGER DIENER, a young servant	Tenor
EIN ALTER DIENER, an old servant	Bass
DIE AUFSEHERIN, an overseer	Soprano
FÜNF MÄGDE, five maids	
FIRST MAID	Alto
SECOND MAID	Mezzo-soprano
THIRD MAID	Mezzo-soprano
FOURTH MAID	Soprano
FIFTH MAID	Soprano

## Setting:

Ancient Mycenae. The inner courtyard of the palace of Agamemnon, murdered king of Mycenae. The inner courtyard is bordered by the rear of the palace and low buildings, inhabited by the servants.<sup>188</sup>

## Synopsis:

Servant girls comment on the wild behavior of Elektra, Agamemnon's daughter. When they have gone, Elektra recounts her father's murder at the hands of her mother, Klytämnestra, and her mother's lover, Aegisth. Calling on her father's spirit, Elektra vows to avenge him. Chrysothemis, Elektra's younger sister interrupts and urges Elektra to give up her obsession with revenge so they both can lead normal lives. As noises from within the palace herald the approach of Klytämnestra, Chrysothemis rushes off, leaving Elektra to face their mother alone.

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<sup>188</sup> Strauss, *Elektra*, 1 and 5. Dramatis Personae and Setting are from this source.

The queen staggers in; drugs, loss of sleep and fear of retribution have made a wreck of her. She asks Elektra to tell her what kind of sacrifice to the gods will give her peace. Elektra tells Klytämnestra that her nightmares will cease when the blood of an impure woman is shed. When asked to name the victim, Elektra screams it is Klytämnestra herself, and that she and her banished brother Orest will wield the axe. Klytämnestra is shaken; however, her mood abruptly changes when her confidante runs in and whispers something in her ear. Laughing maniacally, Klytämnestra leaves Elektra and goes back into the palace.

The mystery of Klytämnestra's laughter is explained when Chrysothemis reappears with news that Orest is dead. Stunned, Elektra tells her sister she must now help kill Klytämnestra and Aegisth. When the girl pulls away in terror and runs off, Elektra starts to dig for the buried ax that killed Agamemnon.

As she digs, Elektra is interrupted by a stranger who says he has come to inform Klytämnestra of Orest's death. When Elektra reveals her name, he tells her Orest lives. Servants come and kiss his hand. The dogs of the house know me, he says, but not my own sister. Crying his name, Elektra falls into Orest's arms and tells him she has lived only for his return.

Their reunion is cut short when Orest is summoned before Klytämnestra. Hardly has he entered the palace when a scream is heard and Elektra, anxiously waiting, knows he has killed their mother. Aegisth now arrives, and Elektra joyfully lights his way into the palace, where he too meets his doom. While the halls resound with tumultuous confusion, Elektra, transported, begins an ecstatic dance. The release of so much pent-up hate and joy proves too much for her; when Chrysothemis returns, Elektra falls dead.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> The Metropolitan Opera, *Elektra Synopsis*, accessed 30 July 2012, <http://www.metoperafamily.org/metopera/history/stories/synopsis.aspx?id=70>. Synopsis taken in entirety from this website.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Robyn Michele Rocklein was born and raised in Lincoln, Nebraska. After attending the University of Nebraska for two years, majoring in Pre-Law and Theatre (Bachelor of Fine Arts in Acting), she joined the United States Army where she served as a Counterintelligence Special Agent for the United States Army Foreign Intelligence Activity (USAFIA) at Fort Meade, Maryland. She worked on numerous special projects to include surveillance teams, liaison between USAFIA and other national level agencies, and the damage assessment for the Aldrich Ames case. She was honorably discharged and moved to Germany with her husband, Timothy, where she worked as a hospital administrator in military hospitals due to her security clearance.

Upon return to the United States, she attended the University of Arizona in Tucson, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Music Degree, *summa cum laude*, in 2004. Due to her unique experiences with USAFIA, upon graduation she was recruited to teach at the Counterintelligence Special Agent Course (CISAC) at the United States Army Intelligence Center at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. While serving as a Senior Faculty Advisor, award-winning Master Instructor, and Curriculum Developer for the CISAC, she continued to pursue music, singing as a soloist with regional orchestras, as well as singing in numerous productions with Arizona Opera. She decided to pursue a Master of Music Degree which she completed at the University of Arizona in 2010.

She is a two-time winner of the Igor Gorin Memorial Award and Miriam L. Wolfe Award, and is a Medici Scholarship Winner. She has taught a variety of history, English, intelligence operations, and criminal justice courses for the Department of Defense and Cochise College. She studied voice with Carole FitzPatrick, Kristin Dauphinais, and Larry Day, and taught voice as a Graduate Teaching Assistant at the University of Arizona and at Arizona State University. During the summer of 2011, she conducted research in France, and is preparing articles on the music of Georges Fragerolle and the Chat Noir. Her other research interests include women of antiquity and Greek myths, and their representations in music.

In addition to her academic endeavors, she is an award winning Mezzo-Soprano and has appeared as a soloist in England, Germany, and Austria, as well as throughout the US. She is a member of the National Association for the Teachers of Singing, The College Music Society, and The Classical Association of the Middle West and South, The American Philological Association and has recently delivered papers at The College of Music Society's Pacific Southwest Regional Conference and the Eta Sigma Phi Classical Symposium, The Ancient World: Then and Now.